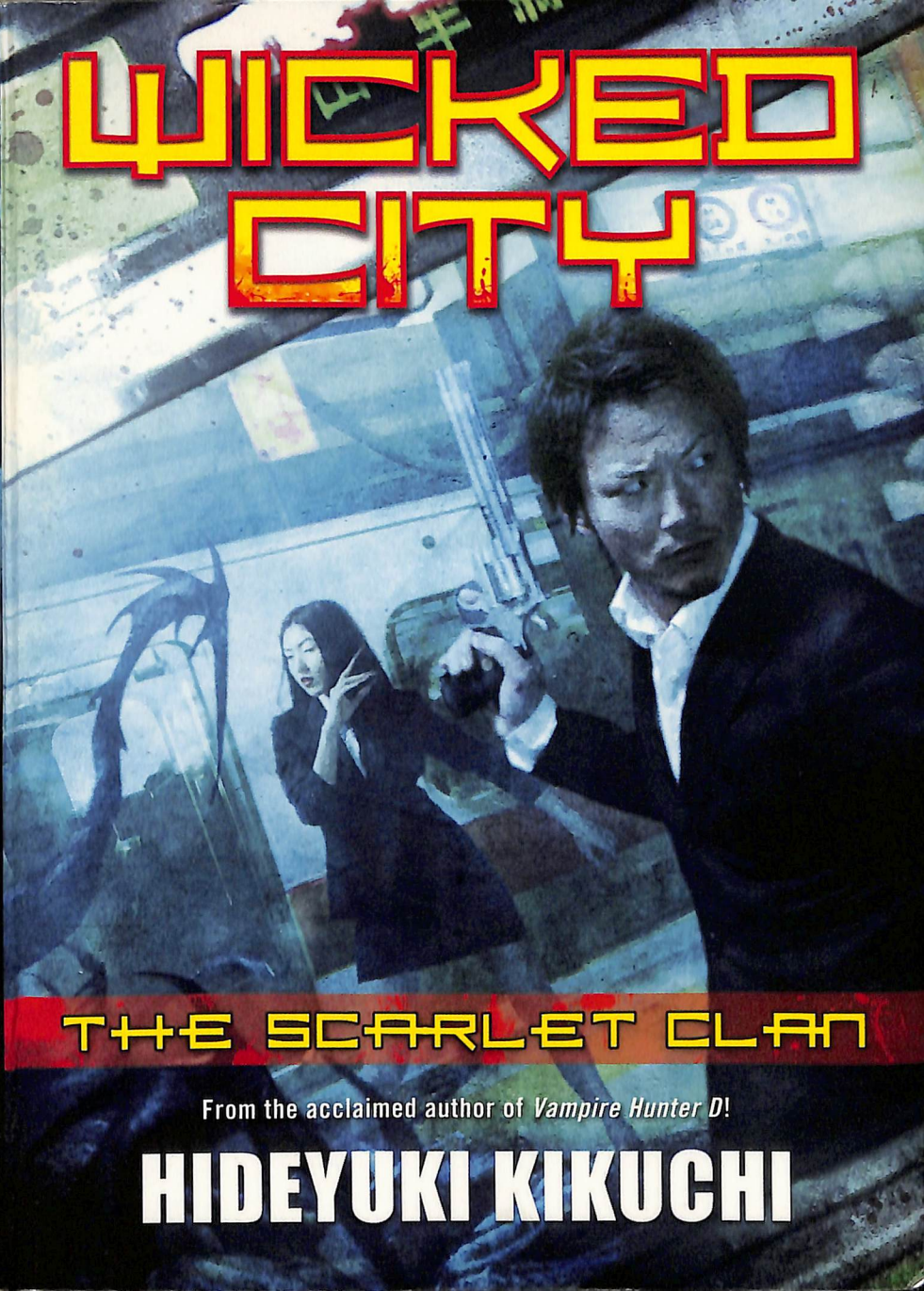
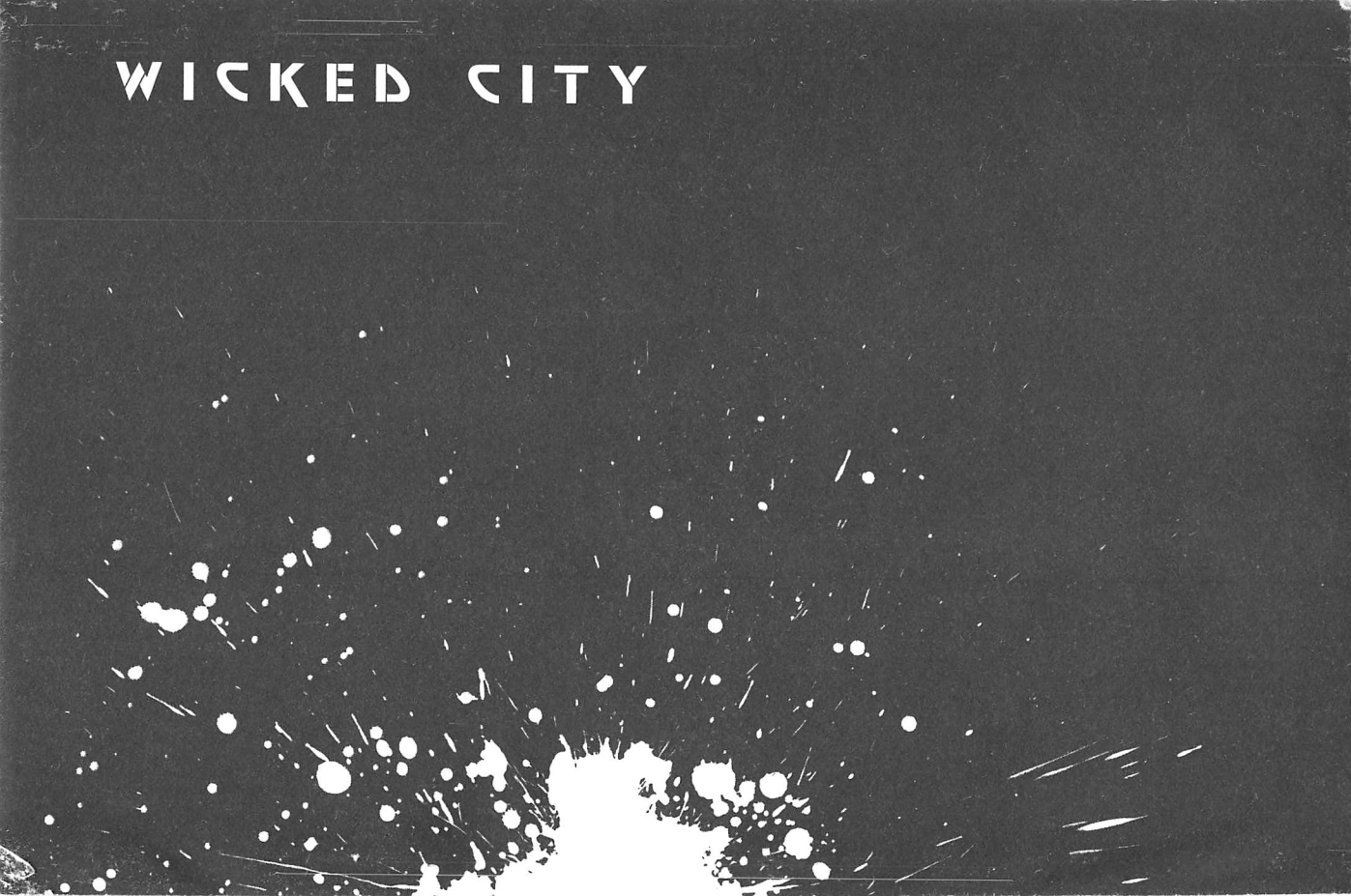

WICKED CITY
THE SCARLET CLAN
From the acclaimed author of *Vampire Hunter D*!
HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

WICKED CITY



WICKED CITY books by Hideyuki Kikuchi

Wicked City: Black Guard
Wicked City: The Other Side
Wicked City: The Scarlet Clan

WICKED CITY

THE SCARLET CLAN

HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI

A TOR / SEVEN SEAS BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

WICKED CITY: THE SCARLET CLAN

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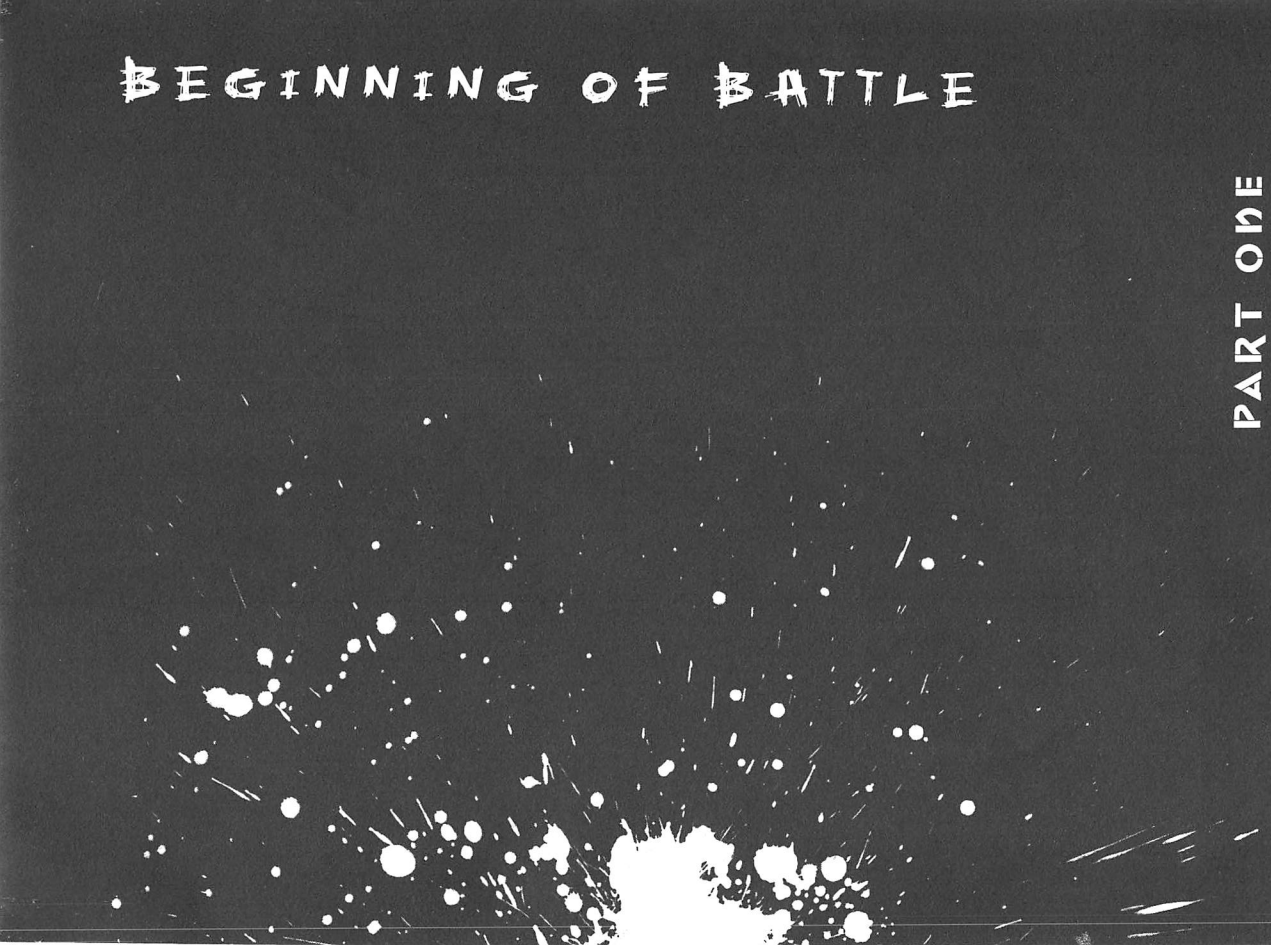
BEGINNING OF BATTLE

PART ONE



1

THE CITY of Roppongi embraced the night. Roppongi was home to visitors from all over the country; the streets were always crowded with businessmen entertaining clients or young people with more money and time than they needed. But they all had one thing in common: They all went wild when they came to Roppongi. The city was ripe every night with bar fights, young men squaring off over a woman, robberies, and murders.

Through the violence, all of the perpetrators were the same. Every fist that cut through the wind and hit

its mark was comprised of bones, flesh, and skin. The knife that sliced into the fat greasy stomach of a middle-aged man was a normal knife, made of metal.

The blood was all red.

Everyone was the same, categorized as one kind of animal. No matter what they did or how they did it, they were humans.

Unfortunately, that rule could not be applied to the "other" world. Especially at night. Roppongi was a strange place. Every night at midnight, it went through a transformation, moving into that other world, invisible in the daytime.

The impossibly beautiful woman walking by? Anyone looking closely will notice that her eyes are the color of blood. Or the group of businessmen, chatting in a corner of the bar? Their fingers can bend backward so far they touch the backs of their hands. The barmaids suddenly look awkward walking on two legs. They slink off to the back room, safely away from the eyes of customers or other employees, and bend forward until their hands reach the floor and they walk on all fours.

The night gave them a chance as darkness swarmed the city. It was the chance for them to reclaim their true natures—both for those who attempted to invade our world and for those who fought to block them.

. . .

August 15, 3:00 A.M. Something was brewing. Several odd shadows hovered in the doorways near the Toriizaka Church, where a priest was in the middle of a prayer.

It was the middle of August, but there was a fall-like chill in the air already. The men who belonged to the shadows understood it was more than just strange weather. The humid, decayed earth in the cemetery emitted a nasty energy that colored everything. Every man who hid in the shadows knew that at this hour more than humans walked the streets of Roppongi.

Toriizaka Church was a few meters down the road from where they kept watch. A few meters beyond that loomed the iron gate that guarded the entrance to Toyo Eiwa Women's University, Kindergarten, and Elementary School. Beyond that was the Toriizaka Slope, which was packed with female students every day at sundown.

There was nothing unusual about the area. But there was something spooky going on in this quiet bit of street that was removed from the bustle of the city.

"Everyone in their position?" one of the men asked in a low mumble. That was how they always communicated.

Everyone nodded.

"What about the back?" the man asked.

"The Sharp brothers are there," another answered.

A third voice spoke from the shadows. "Are they okay? Just the two of them?"

"I'll ask," said the first man.

The only reply was the faint click of someone taking the safety off of an automatic weapon.

As if on cue, all of them put their right hands inside their jackets and stepped out into the meager light of the street. They were an odd assortment—a middle-aged, small-company executive with thinning hair and a paunch, two white-collar men carrying briefcases, and three young men wearing mirrored sunglasses and camouflage T-shirts beneath leather jackets. Men from all walks of life. Although they appeared incongruous, it was not an unusual sight, given where they stood.

They were gathered in front of the Azabu Concert Hall. However, no concert was scheduled on this quiet summer night. The men's interest lay elsewhere.

"We've put a shield around the whole hall," one of the young men said, excitement evident in his voice. "We were able to put tremendous pressure on it without them noticing. Now all we have to do is move in for the kill."

One of the white-collar types nodded. "If we succeed, we can forestall their invasion. Let's do it."

Down the street at the Toriizaka Church, the priest

uttered a prayer. "God bless you and protect you." He knew.

"Five seconds," the man with the potbelly muttered.

"Four . . . three . . . two . . ." the rest said together. They kicked the ground as one.

For an instant, the gigantic concert hall appeared one size smaller, squeezed tight in a gigantic curtain of energy. The light of the streetlamp picked up six right hands emerging from six inside pockets. The night brightened with the shine of light glimmering off steel.

Everyone felt the presence inside. It emanated nervousness.

One of the young men kicked down the door, and all six barreled inside.

They were welcomed by darkness deeper than that outside. A flash of light appeared from the middle of the darkness, followed by a burst of noise. A gunshot followed a second later, and from somewhere nearby came a low groan.

"Throw the flare bomb!" one of the young men shouted.

A flash cut through the darkness, covering everyone's faces with white light. All six of the men still stood—and they weren't alone.

The intruders stood behind the ticket desk, dressed casually in T-shirts or polo shirts. That was where their similarities to the humans ended. Their physical constructions were impossible in a three-dimensional world. Some had a protruding fang; some were covered with steel-like scales.

Before anyone could speak, there was a thunderous roar as sparks shot from the right hand of one of the white-collar men. An instant later, the T-shirted chest of a creature with an octopus-like head exploded. The wound splashed boiling liquid onto one of the young men. He screamed and put his hands to his face, where his flesh burned.

Papers fluttered around on the desk, and the pen holder fell. A smoking bullet hole gaped from the middle of a poster advertising an upcoming concert.

There was another gunshot and then absolute quiet.

"Clear. Let's go," the potbellied man said.

"One got away," said one of the young men. He tossed aside his broken sunglasses.

"The Sharp brothers will have taken care of it," said the third young man. He didn't address anyone in particular but kept his gaze on the floor.

"Taki, it's over. We did it," one of the men dressed as a white-collar worker said without any trace of sarcasm.

The young man called Taki put his Smith & Wesson M29, smoke still trailing from the muzzle, into the nylon

holster at his left shoulder. "What were they here for? Any clue, Adachi?"

"No. Nothing so far," the white-collar man replied quickly. "The only thing I can tell you is that this meeting was special." He hesitated.

"What's the matter?" Taki asked.

"It's just that . . . I would have expected some kind of ritual tools that they used littered around, but there are none. It struck me as odd."

Renzaburo Taki nodded and rubbed the back of his head. "You're right. Kamaguchi, go check the records for similar cases in the past."

"Copy that," nodded the potbellied man, sticking his hand into his back pocket.

Taki finally looked around as the darkness gave way to an eerie gray gloom.

The third young man, who had managed to come through the melee without a scratch on him, poured acid onto the remains of one of the otherworldly creatures. Almost instantly, the mutilated body dissolved to nothing. Now all they had to do was bury a charm in the concrete floor to make this building safe from other invaders.

Why did they choose this place? Why did it have to be here? Taki asked himself the question that a Black Guard knew better than to speak aloud. In the end, it didn't matter why they chose a place, only that they had

to be stopped. *Most of their habits remain a mystery. I'll never be able to get them as long as I think like a human,* Taki thought.

Since the beginning of human history, those from the other side had always been found in the least likely quarters. Like the notorious Mount Vesuvius that wiped Pompeii off the face of the earth when it erupted. Or a suspicious nest found in a cave in Altamira. The Black Guard had sealed off the cave when a tourist noticed something strange in the paintings. But the most recent and perhaps the strangest choice was the watchtower on the shore of Nice, France. One would think a sewer in New York would suit demons better, but no, it was a tower. Humans had never been able to understand their preferences.

One of the white-collar men emerged from a corner. "One's still alive. Over here!"

2

TAKI WALKED toward the shout without a word. He found the freakish octopus man lying faceup on the floor in front of a computer. A dark red flower bloomed on his black T-shirt where the bullet had gone through his chest.

He bent over the creature to get a better look. His eyes, nose, and mouth were all shaped alike. His face was shaped like a willow leaf, long and thin with no teeth in his mouth, no pupils in his eyes. His skin shone like silver; the glare of the flare bomb made him seem even brighter—his face was made of steel.

"Can you hear me?" Taki asked as he stood.

The silver face turned toward him. "Are you Taki?" Despite his condition, the creature had a booming voice.

"What were you doing here?" Taki asked.

The silver face remained expressionless. "You want to know?" He laughed condescendingly. "Well, you'll find out sooner or later. But it won't be me that tells you. It's better you don't know. Ignorance is bliss." He brought his left hand to his chest.

Taki's M29 was out in a flash and pointed at the silvery face.

"Don't worry. I'm not armed. I just don't want to die with this thing lodged inside me." The man stuck his index and middle fingers into the small red hole in his chest. With a nauseating, sucking sound, they went in deeper. There was no sign of pain on the creature's mask-like face. After a few moments, he pulled his fingers out in a careless way and tossed the bullet onto the floor.

"Okay, I'm going to tell you something. No one

else knows but me. We got together for a summoning ritual."

"What did you summon? I can't think of any monster scheduled to be summoned for this month."

"So much for the information network of the Black Guard. We got distracted halfway through, but it is done. They're on their way."

What kind of ritual did they perform in one corner of a concert hall lobby?

"What did you summon?" asked the young man who had been hit by the acidic blood of the creature. His face was half eaten away.

The creature said nothing. He pressed his fingers on the purple bandana that circled his forehead, and white smoke rose where he touched. He pouted, and then he smiled and thrust his lips out, as if kissing something.

Shafts of light appeared inside his eyes and mouth.

"Get back!" Taki shouted. He grabbed the young man with the disfigured face and pulled him to the ground.

There was a soft, beautiful sound, and the creature's head was blown to bits, his face red and juicy like a pomegranate. Something fell from the pile of flesh.

It was the pin from the grenade he had swallowed. The young man would have been hit by shrapnel if Taki had not pulled him away.

Finally, everything was quiet once more.

"Get rid of it," Taki said calmly.

The other young man came toward them, holding a metallic can. He pulled it opened and poured the contents onto the corpse.

"Let's get out of here," Taki ordered. He turned his back on the body, which had started to emit white smoke. In ten seconds it had dissolved completely. Not even a stain left on the floor.

"Come on," Taki said. "We'll leave the rest for the sweeper team."

All six men turned and started for the exit. Suddenly a cold wind swept through the lobby and over them.

They froze. They all felt the presence behind them. The summoning ritual had been a success.

Nobody moved; their blood had turned so cold they could not even break out in a sweat. Although they were all Black Guards—the warriors that fought extraterrestrial creatures—the horror of the power that was trying to enter their world was not lost on them.

Demons had the power to make humans fall into madness by their mere presence. It was their basic nature. When the select few who were inherently immune to the evil power of the demons had gotten together and formed the Black Guard, their first task had been

to conceive a way to protect others from the demons' eldritch power.

The biggest problem was that most of the time the demons were capable of sniffing out a human presence, so they were able to sneak up on people without detection. Two hundred years after the launch of the Black Guard, three hundred Black Guards had fallen victim to demons because of this power. Considering how few guards there were in the world, that number was devastating.

Later, the Black Guard had successfully formed an alliance with the moderates from the other side, and they gave the Black Guard a spell that would seal up a demon's power. The body count went way down. Nowadays, the Guard could give this ability to humans—if they possessed certain qualities—without them noticing, in order to prepare them for future battles. The Black Guard was always on the lookout for new candidates. And not just the Black Guard, but the enemy, too. Humans with total immunity were always in demand. With enough training, they could develop an ability to bounce anyone's power back to their assailant.

At the moment, taken by surprise, Taki and his men were vulnerable. Every one of them tried to cast the sealing spell as shivers gripped them in an icy terror. Tension built through the lobby. One little push and they would all explode.

The young man with the acid-burned face suddenly convulsed. A deep breath escaped his lips, and he started to walk slowly toward the door. Nobody else moved. No one stopped him. They did not even notice that he was moving; they were absorbed in trying to seal up the demon's power.

The young man placed his hand on the knob and turned toward his peers. What was left of his face was eerily calm. He bowed his head quickly and disappeared behind the door, never to return.

Taki stood there, numb. All he could do was keep his mind focused so he would not go insane. He had never felt anything like this before. This was an unknown evil.

It had started to eat away at the edges of his mind, as if the assailant had sunk its teeth into his heart. He had to do something before it had a chance to deliver a fatal blow.

Taki mustered all the Psychic Power he had and released it into his right hand. The numbness in his hand faded. His thumb tightened on the hammer of his gun. The cold feel of the steel woke up his consciousness, linking it to reality.

Would this be enough? He was not sure. He raised the barrel. There was a dull sound as he cocked the gun.

Renzaburo Taki, a fine Black Guard, gushed all of his energy into it.

Poof. It was gone.

Dull thuds sounded in an ominous succession as the Black Guards fell, one after another. They were so exhausted they could not even sit up on their knees.

Only Taki remained standing. Ever so slowly, he shifted his gaze toward what had been the center of the evil being's presence. Suddenly he was seized by a most unpleasant feeling.

The space where it had been was rotten, giving off an awful smell. The nauseating sound of flesh being ripped from bone filled every corner of the room. It was as if the very air rotted and crumbled.

The potbellied man staggered weakly. "What was that? I have never felt this kind of power . . . If it weren't for you, Taki, we'd all have been—"

"You don't know that," Taki said. He swallowed bitter saliva and brought his right hand up to look at his gun. His eyes reflected a chunk of red steel. His M29's chrome surface was covered with rust. Then Taki understood that the enemy had had its sights on his gun from the beginning. "The gun's out," he muttered.

"So *that* was what they summoned? That thing we just saw?" The potbellied man's voice was tinged with fear. "Or rather, didn't see."

Taki heaved a resigned sigh as chills ran down his spine. Finally, his body was relaxed enough to break out in a cold sweat.

3

TAKI LEFT the Azabu branch of the Black Guard. He stopped by headquarters in the Ginza to report what had happened and then went back to his apartment in Hamadayama. He parked his car in the underground garage and entered the building. He winked at the janitor mopping the lobby floor. He glared at Taki; he was a Black Guard, too, as were half the people in the building. If the normal half found out the frightening fact, there would be no end to the panic it would cause. The janitor came closer and returned the wink.

"Your wife is here," the balding janitor said, looking upstairs suggestively. "I thought you two were separated."

"She can't sleep alone."

"You'll get a good alimony settlement."

"Yeah, right. Good day." Taki waved to the janitor and got on the elevator. He pushed the button for the seventh floor. A soft chime signaled he had reached his destination. The doors slid open, and a security camera on the ceiling whirled into motion as Taki walked past it on his way down the hall.

He stood in front of the room and pressed the intercom button. No reply. He took out his ID card and inserted it into the reader by the door. The door unlocked with a loud click. It opened on a bleak, almost sterile living room. The lights were on. Taki went straight to the bedroom and opened the door. A woman stood on the bed.

It was Makie. She was not wearing a see-through negligee with girly frills, however. The woman from the other world looked her best in a black three-piece suit.

Taki's nose was immediately struck by the sweet scent that wafted from the alluring body of the female Black Guard. It made him dizzy. She seemed different than usual somehow. Then again, it was natural, given her current condition.

"I heard your footsteps. I would have thought you would have sneaked in if you thought there was an intruder," Makie said in a slightly accusatory tone.

Taki tilted his head to one side. "Only you have the card."

"What if I had been robbed?"

"I felt your presence."

Makie's mouth softened into a nearly adorable pout. "I'm a bit rusty at concealing myself, I guess."

"Well, under the circumstances, it can happen." Taki slipped off his leather jacket and tossed it onto a

nearby chair. Then he removed his shoulder holster and draped it over the back.

Taki's T-shirt was slimming, concealing his well-defined muscles.

"Why not go all the way?" Makie said with a suggestive look in her eye. "Take it all off."

"Why don't you come down here? Sometimes it's fun doing it standing up."

"I'd love to, but I can't. It's heavy." Makie's eyelashes fluttered, which was odd for her. She was not the kind of woman to flinch at pain. But Makie was from the other side, and movements that humans take for granted, like sitting down, could cause her great pain. Very recently, lying down had been a struggle as well.

"Don't worry, I'll help you." Taki took off his shoes, climbed onto the bed, and gently placed his hand on her hips. "But before we start, tell me why you are here."

Makie smiled. "I'm relieved. You haven't gone insane with erotic thoughts." She laughed. "You should have seen all the men I had to pass on my way here."

Taki knew what she was talking about—her otherworldly scent. The initial dizziness was gone, but when Taki stood close to her, his loins burned, wanting some action. A surge of wild desire sent blood gushing into his cock, making it harder, pushing him to become an animal. If Taki had been a normal

human, he would have lost it by now, jumped her, and received a blow on his jaw for the trouble. It did not necessarily mean that they were weak. No one would be able to resist her. Not just humans. Any male of any species. The scent, part of her demonic pheromone makeup, was something she usually had under control, something she could use to her advantage when she needed it. But in the last week it was constant, and Makie couldn't rein it in. It was part of the process, Taki supposed, but he couldn't wait until things were back to normal.

"Any weird accidents?" Makie asked nonchalantly.

Taki's eyes narrowed at Makie's inquiry. "What do you mean?" He cast a searching net of Psy Power, scanning her psyche. Nothing too unusual, just slight discomfort. Perfectly normal for her condition, he supposed, although he realized he didn't know *what* was normal for a demon woman in her condition.

Makie looked at the floor. "Something extremely dangerous has been set in motion. Something neither of us has ever seen."

Taki felt oddly excited. "How did you know? Yeah, it was bad. But the only one I've told was the Boss. This case is confidential."

Makie slowly dropped her gaze to her lap.

"The baby?" Taki asked.

Makie nodded. "The baby." She had become pregnant about six months ago, when the human and demon worlds renewed their mutual nonaggression treaty. The baby was Taki's. A hundred and eighty days had passed, and her body showed no signs of pregnancy. Whether the baby would take after its mother, the demonic creature, or Taki, the human, nobody knew. Nothing like it had happened in all of recorded time.

"Three hours ago. I was resting in my room when I got a vision. I've never had one before. I saw you, in some kind of big, open room, like a lobby. You looked frozen, and there was a shadow behind you," Makie explained.

Taki's heart thumped in his chest. Nobody at the scene had seen the demon, yet someone who could not have seen it saw it.

"Mr. Mayart said the baby had a vast amount of potential and that it would be a new bridge that links the two worlds, remember? Obviously our baby's unique. It wouldn't be a leap to think it alerted you to my danger. What did you see? What are we up against?"

"You know the answer yourself," Makie said softly. "RHHMEIGQQKVEE. Repeat that a million times to make it sound like a word from this world. Here you call them something else: the Shus."

Taki's hand dropped from Makie's plump hip. "I knew it . . . But I thought you put them away long before we hooked up."

"You know that we can never count on anyone staying put away," Makie said.

Taki knew she was right. "Bringing the Shus back was no small task. And the enemy did a poor job of diverting our attention from it. We knew exactly where and when they would be summoning something. Just not what."

Makie nodded. "But they've done it. That's how desperately they want the Shu family back. Tonight's meeting was the culmination of their efforts. Summoning them usually requires a long-term commitment."

"How long?"

"A thousand years," Makie replied matter-of-factly. "Give or take."

Taki shook his head in disbelief. "The ones who summoned them started when Yoritada took power in 978. They've been fooling us all those centuries."

"They have been anticipating our baby since ancient times. It's hard to think about it, that they've had their sights on our baby for so long. *Our* baby," Makie said without any trace of emotion.

Taki was dumbfounded by the idea that the demons had been waiting for their baby for over a millennium.

Even an experienced guard like him had no idea how the minds of demons worked. "Baby versus the Shu family. It's going to be an interesting battle. The hybrid baby, linking two worlds. It's born trouble. Should we nip it in the bud?" Taki said matter-of-factly.

"How?" Makie smiled her wicked smile. "They can't get to the baby. Even *I* don't know where it is. The ultrasound showed nothing. But I know it's there."

"In what shape?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Of course."

"Doting father already?" Makie's lips twisted into a smile. Taki leaned forward and sucked on them, kissing her passionately. Makie stared at the human male as he took her breath into his body. Her breathing was too shallow and deep and slow to be observed. It was subtle, like the respiration of plankton. It gave the impression that she was not breathing at all. It would not become irregular, even with a sudden movement, and each breath was three hours long.

"All right, Taki." Makie took his hands and placed them on her hips. He pulled off her belt and undid the zipper of her trousers. Her snug slacks slid across her skin and puddled around her ankles. She was not wearing panties. Her skin was excruciatingly smooth and fine, like porcelain. Taki let his hand glide across her firm lower belly, amazed that the fruit of their

passions was tucked away in there somewhere. There had been no change to her body in the past six months. Was it Makie or the baby that caused such a phenomenon, Taki wondered. With her still standing, he got on his knees, went below her belly, and buried his face into the dark shrub between her legs.

Makie uttered a small gasp and cradled his head. Taki wiggled his tongue around as her secret place became moist. Sweet, bitter liquid trickled down to his tongue. The female demon's dew tasted like no other; it was quite indescribable. She moaned in pleasure, and Taki wondered if what he saw was what he got. He could never be sure whether she was moaning because it felt good or because she thought it was what he expected. Either way, she drove him crazy. There was no doubt about it.

Makie lifted one leg and wrapped it around his neck, exposing her sweet pussy even more. That was provocative enough to push him over, but actually quite frightening when he remembered that she could snap his neck like a twig. He tried not to think about it, and instead concentrated on moving his tongue faster.

"Ooh, Taki. That feels so good. More. Give me more." Makie sounded like a woman at the height of pleasure. *For now, that's all I get,* Taki thought faintly as waves of excitement ripped through his body.

"Get up, Taki. Stand up. Make love to me the way

you want," Makie urged him. He stood up with Makie's leg wrapped around him. "I want you inside me. Quick, Taki. I want you now."

Makie lifted her hips and pulled his throbbing cock against her pussy. Taki swallowed, feeling the warmth of her flesh.

The phone rang. It was just a normal ringing sound, with nothing to give away who the caller was. But Taki said, "It's the Boss. Let it ring."

"If you want," Makie sounded indifferent. Her tone was dry, a complete one-eighty from the passionate voice she'd used begging Taki to make love to her, just a second ago. Taki shrugged and got off the bed. Makie's leg was still raised high.

Taki could not resist asking, "You comfy?"

Makie nodded, then lowered her leg and hopped off the bed. She walked across the room and stood in the doorway. Taki grabbed the phone on the side table. After a pause, he put it against his ear. Something erupted from the receiver. It went into Taki's ear, ripped through his eardrum, and burrowed into his brain.

4

TAKI FELT someone else's consciousness enter his mind.

Go to the window, the stranger inside him ordered. It was as if the intruder were speaking inside Taki's head. He felt like his brains were being fried. His Psychic Power swiftly worked to chase away the invader. When it came to the chase, his Psy Power acted with its own discretion and without any regard for the pain it caused Taki. He could have controlled it but let it do as it liked; in this case it was necessary.

The invader's agony was palpable in his head, echoing with energy like a rockslide. But then the intruder got the upper hand. Taki was blinded by a flash of white light, and he was compelled, like a man on automatic pilot, to go the window.

Jump, the stranger within said.

Taki hung tough, bearing the pain like the trained Black Guard he was. If it kept up much longer, though, his mind would be destroyed. He couldn't resist. With a trembling hand, Taki opened the east-facing window. A gust of warm wind wafted in. He was

seven floors up. No Black Guard would survive a twenty-meter drop. He swung his leg over the ledge.

"Taki," Makie called in a quiet voice. She had no idea what was going on inside him, but her voice made Taki pause. Or maybe it was just his Psychic Power getting the better of the invader.

It is inside your head, a familiar voice whispered in his mind. It was his own voice. *Get rid of it. Take your M29 and blow your brains out, and it will be gone.*

Taki shook his head, realizing it wasn't real. The attacker was trying to blend with his psyche. *Neat trick,* Taki thought. It could bend his mind without manipulating his Psy Power.

Taki went back into the bedroom.

"Taki?" Makie called him again as he went through the door.

"It's okay." Taki had no idea where the reply came from. He seemed outside himself for a moment, watching himself as he casually pulled his M29 from the shoulder holster. He placed the gun's muzzle against his temple.

"Taki!!" Makie cried.

That's it. Pull the trigger. Blow them away! All of your Psychic Power!

Taki's subconscious was faster than the invader by one-thousandth of a second. A powerful burst of Psy

Power burned down the tormentor as Taki's finger squeezed the trigger. The air roared like a tornado. Taki's face was deadpan as he stared at the barrel of the still-vibrating gun. Bluish smoke came out of the end of the muzzle, and the smell of cordite was thick in the air. The scent titillated him.

"Wonderfully done," Makie said, staring at the wall in the back of the bedroom. "I don't know if air conditioners are the type to hold a grudge. But don't lose sleep over it."

Taki looked away from the hole his bullet had punched in the middle of the window air-conditioning unit. An unpleasant feeling rose up in his brain. He slumped over and fell to his knees. His back gave a spasm and he threw up, but nothing came out. He kept retching, the source of his illness his own brain. Finally something flew out of Taki's mouth.

It was the tormentor itself. Its shape was only recognizable in the demon world, but a human might think it looked like a star. Then it began to squirm, changing its shape. One minute it was a two-dimensional flat entity, and the next it had transformed into a cube.

Five pale fingers grasped it as it slowly tried to escape, leaving a trail of slime behind it. Taki trembled as he heard a faint otherworldly scream coming from inside Makie's closed hand. She raised her hand to

her mouth. Her puckered lips were suggestive and arousing as she blew into her fist.

Blue fire erupted between her fingers. The room was aglow in the pale light. Makie stood there, watching Taki, her face cold and delicate. Then the light blinked out, like a burned out lightbulb, and was gone. Makie opened her hand, and what looked like flakes of burned paper fell from her palm. They disappeared into thin air before they hit the floor.

"Shall I blow into your head?" Makie asked, completely serious.

"No. I'll be fine," Taki replied cautiously.

Makie put one hand on her hip. "Drop the act. I can't let the world be destroyed just to protect your fragile ego."

"Then call the Hospital in Azabu. Let *them* examine the residue inside me. They should be able to find out something about the Shus from that." He looked at the place where the creature had hit the floor after he threw it up and shuddered. "I must be the first one to have survived a fight with them in the past seven thousand years."

A new emotion swept over Makie's face. It was a look of admiration and pride.

Makie moved toward the phone, but it started to ring, annoyingly, just as she reached for it. Taki

swooped in and picked up the receiver before Makie could touch it.

"Taki here."

"It is me."

It was his boss, but not the one who signed his paycheck. This was his other boss, a privileged man who thought nothing of making his boys work overtime, work that sometimes almost got them killed. And sometimes not almost, but certainly.

"Yes," Taki answered.

"Come to the Hospital quickly."

"It's already gone," Taki said. "I don't need the Hospital."

"I figured you had gotten rid of it by now." The Boss sounded like it was nothing unusual. "Did you kill it?"

"Yes."

"Quite a fight you put up, from the sound of your voice. Is Makie there?"

"Yes."

"Come to the Hospital. I want to talk to you in person. We'll discuss how to fight the family."

Taki leaned against the wall. "I'm kind of beat right now."

The Boss didn't seem to care. "Shuzen Lee and Wickerman are waiting outside. This is going to be one hell of a battle."

"Hope so."

"Move it. Now. I don't want slackers."

"Roger," Taki said, resigned. His nap would have to wait. The Boss didn't take no for an answer, and Taki knew better than to try to talk him out of the meeting.

"You've got thirty minutes. See you then."

The receiver hitting the cradle sounded like thunder to Taki.

THE WARRIORS ARE HERE

PART TWO

1

At the Hospital, located in Arisugawa Park in Azabu, the procedures were surprisingly quick. They took only five minutes. But getting the results would take over an hour. While Taki waited, everyone got together in the conference room on the first floor. Taki had still not been able to grab a wink of sleep. He was wiped out, but neither the Hospital staff nor the Boss would give him a moment of peace until they were finished.

Sitting with him in the room were the Sharp brothers—Don and his baby brother, Mike—plus Lee

Shuzen from Guilin, China. And then there was Wickerman. They were the finest of the Black Guard, the most powerful and the most ruthless. Like Makie, Wickerman was from the other side. Of course, the Boss was in the room as well. As soon as Taki had arrived, the Boss ordered everyone to be quiet and announced the start of the meeting. At first glance, this chubby man with a short mustache looked innocuous. But despite his friendly appearance, his eyes held a hint of emptiness. No Black Guard would be able to stare into those eyes for more than two minutes without going mad. A regular human wouldn't last fifteen seconds.

This strange man wasn't Taki's only boss. He had another one, too, the one that paid him an annual income of 370 million yen for his work at an "electronics company." His salary was a pittance compared to the bonuses that the boss sitting before him now gave out.

Don Sharp lifted his right hand, as if on cue. He was a B-list movie director for Universal Studios. That was just his cover, of course. As far as the outside world knew, he was visiting Japan to shoot a new movie, called *Frankenstein vs. Hachi*. When Don spoke, his pale blue eyes moved back and forth beneath his crewcut blond hair. He had the build of a wrestler, his leather jacket barely containing his large muscles.

"Yes, Don?" the Boss said.

Don spoke fluent Japanese. "Finally a chance to speak. What is this all about? Who are the Shus?"

The Boss sat down and leaned back in his chair, his fingers tented over his belly. "That, I don't know. The Director will bring us the answer in fifty minutes. Right now I know as much as you do."

There was a brief silence, and then the group went over what little they knew about the Shu family.

"When it comes to the Shus, there are certain rules among the Black Guard," said Lee. He had classic good looks—a fair complexion, almond-shaped eyes, and a crescent-shaped mouth. "Rule number one: Never talk about the family. Rule number two: Never fight them. And number three—"

"Kill them," Mike Sharp interjected. Taki glanced at him and felt a slight discomfort. Don and Mike were identical twins. They both had the same close-cropped heads, the same square jaws, and the same large bodies. They even wore identical leather jackets. The effect was eerie. Taki had never seen brothers, even twins, who looked as much alike as the Sharp boys.

Mike continued. "Kill them, no matter how unfair, burn the remains to ashes, and then bury the ashes where no one will find them."

Another tension-filled silence fell. Makie broke it. "That was the warning *he* left." She didn't identify who "he" was, but apparently everyone else at the

table understood. "I heard it was the Shu family who tried him. And by tried, I don't mean questioned. More like tortured him."

"I was meaning to go back to Hollywood the day after tomorrow and ask for a three-week vacation. Looks like I'm off work indefinitely," Don chimed in. He and his brother laughed, but they fell silent when they realized no one else thought it funny.

"No one knows the full extent of their capabilities. They are a legendary assassin family, cold and ruthless. More like a legendary assassin *organism*. It's tricky," Taki mumbled. He massaged the skin between his eyes. After the doctors had run their tests, they had made him drink a whole liter of some kind of chemical. They said it might have side effects, and they were right. Taki felt dizzy and his head ached. It was getting worse by the minute.

"We have one week before Makie's delivery. We must make sure they stay away from her," the Boss said sharply. Apparently everyone in the room had been filled in about Makie's pregnancy. "We've decided to move her around Tokyo. We did some research and consulted numerous ancient texts and legends. The family has never failed when their target remains in the same place. So the more frequently she moves around, the safer she'll be."

"Where are we going to keep her?" Lee asked.

"I'll let you know before we leave here. We will do the preparations."

Lee exhaled in relief. "Thank God."

The Boss smiled at Lee's reaction, but Taki's mind was elsewhere. The legendary family, the most feared assassin group in history, coming after his child. His insides turned to ice at the thought.

"This is all very interesting," the Sharp brothers said with a smile. They had worked 324 assignments with a 99 percent victim survival rate. They closed all cases successfully and came back alive. They were born fighters. "And it sounds like fun," Mike added. He was ready for some action.

"So, Makie, what are you going to do?" Lee asked with a calm voice. In the room thick with tension and excitement, only he had maintained perfect composure. He was the best kung-fu fighter in the Black Guard. It was hard to imagine from his cool face that he had killed five demons in Peking at the age of two. "How are you going to protect yourself?"

The Boss answered. "We will put her under seal. We still don't know how many members there are in the Shu family. We will seal her in some confidential place and post guards there. This is where you two come in. I want top-notch fighters for this."

Don looked Makie up and down, then glanced at her flat stomach. "Where is the—" he stopped,

perhaps realizing that asking questions would not get him answers. He took a deep breath and started again. "Where is this mystery location?"

"Still under consideration," the Boss said. "We have plenty of guards tucked away, but Makie's our top priority. It requires the best we have."

"So it's up to us?" Mike Sharp asked with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "We were told that the Japan branch liked to push guards around, but this, my friend, is outrageous."

The Boss's expression remained passive. "Come on, now, let's keep this low-key. We don't know the first thing about the Shus, except they are assassins. The slate is clean. There is no record of what they are or what they can do. We only know we can't move in a large group. It'd make us an easier target. So we decided to borrow you for a while. You're less conspicuous, so to speak."

Mike shrugged at the Boss's explanation. He didn't seem satisfied with the answer, but knew it was pointless to argue.

His brother, however, didn't. "What's wrong with this Hospital? Why can't she stay here?" Don asked. "It seems safer than a makeshift hideout. If I'm not mistaken, the shield covering this building is one of the toughest in the world."

"We're considering that, too," the Boss said,

observing Makie from the corner of his eye. "The problem is that if we stash her here and they break in, we will lose a lot more than just Makie. This is a resting place for wounded warriors. We can't let them suffer any more than they've already done. And—" He paused, as if interrupted. But no one had spoken. All eyes shifted to the chair closest to the door. The man sitting there stood up. He had not uttered a word since the meeting began, so no one had noticed him until now.

His name was Wickerman. With his pale skin and watery eyes, he looked very much like a sickly man. Of course, he wasn't a man at all, but a demon. If Lee was a man of few words, Wickerman was practically silent.

He held up his hand, urging everyone to remain quiet. He went to the door, soundlessly as a cat, turned the knob, and pulled the door open.

Behind it was a young woman. Judging by her dress, she was a secretary or clerk of some kind. She stood with a tray of coffee and cups in her right hand. Her left was balled into a fist, raised to knock on the door.

She recovered from the surprise of the sudden door opening and cleared her throat. "Um. I've brought you some coffee." She smiled nervously, but froze when she saw the look on Wickerman's face.

He looked over his shoulder at those gathered in the room. "Anyone ask for coffee?"

The girl raised a finger, asking to speak. "Um . . . the Director told me to bring this."

Don Sharp scanned the woman with his Psy Power. "Ease up, buddy," he said to Wickerman. "You're being too careful. No threat there."

Taki nodded in agreement; there seemed nothing unusual about her. There was no way she could be an enemy. Even though the enemy could control their powers from remote places, the shield of the building was impenetrable.

Wickerman moved aside without another word. After a little hesitation, the woman entered the room, her expression harsh and untrusting.

"Don, if it'll make you feel better, call the Director and confirm," Taki said. It wouldn't hurt to double-check. No sense being careless.

Don nodded and reached for a receiver behind him. While Don made the call, the woman passed around the cups.

There was a click, a familiar sound everyone in the room recognized instantly. Don had put down the phone receiver, but that was not the source of the sound. In Don's large hand, which was decorated by a ruby ring, was a shining automatic. It was a Colt M-1911A1, an old U.S. military standard weapon, .45 caliber. It was not loaded with normal bullets—each was bursting with Psy Power, enough to kill most monsters.

He waved the gun in the woman's direction. "Just spoke to the Director. He does not recall asking anyone for coffee. He'll be here in a minute."

"But, I . . ." the woman said in a low voice. She placed the tray over her chest as if protecting herself from the gun. If Don fired, the tray would have about as much effect as an umbrella in a windstorm. "I was asked to bring you coffee, I swear . . ."

The air was suddenly thick with the smell of steel. Everyone, except for the Boss, had taken out a weapon. Someone else might have thought they were overreacting, but they did not become the best by letting down their guard. Their enemy was not to be underestimated.

Wickerman closed the door without a word.

"How did you know?" Mike Sharp asked. "I sensed her presence behind the door, but nothing unusual."

Wickerman remained silent; apparently he wasn't giving away his secret so easily. Every muzzle in the room was aimed at her. There was a deep, low buzzing noise in the hallway. It became louder; it sounded like the electronic sound of a long-distance teleport. The noise grew louder and stopped outside the door. There was a knock.

"Come in," the Boss said. The Director, dressed in his usual sparkling white suit, walked in and glanced at the woman.

"Is it her? Are they telling the truth, Miss Miyake?"

"They're terribly mistaken, sir," the woman protested. "I came here because you told me to, remember?"

"Hold on a minute." The Director looked into her eyes. His gaze was harsh under the glare of his Coke-bottle glasses, and his usual air of warmth was absent.

"I never asked for any coffee."

The blood drained from the woman's face. "But . . . it can't be . . ."

"Mr. Director, step aside," Wickerman said. He had a velvety deep voice. He might be invisible, but when he spoke, everybody noticed him.

The Director held up his hand. "Hold on. She deserves the benefit of the doubt. Let's not jump to any conclusions."

"We cannot take any chances," Lee insisted. Tension in the room increased until it was almost palpable.

"Don't . . . please . . ." The woman stepped back, the tray still against her breast.

The other Black Guards remained at the ready.

"Wait. You can't kill her. That's too far," Don Sharp cut in. "We don't know for sure if she's for real or not."

"Stay back," Lee warned.

Don slowly stood up. "I don't want to be in the way, but . . ." His hands were at his sides. He drew

his Colt and leveled it at Wickerman's chest. Wickerman responded in kind. His weapon was an Ingram MAC-11, just over 22 cm long. The volley of twelve hundred 9 mm bullets it spat out every minute had a deadly effect on a target at close range.

It was Taki who stopped him. "Don't. Come on, Wickerman, we're all on the same side."

Don shrugged. "Okay, look. Let's not get any more confused than we already are. We need to keep our heads clear." He was blithe, as usual.

There was a soft click. Lee's cool gaze moved. Taki had his M29 in his hand. He had cocked the hammer and aimed the muzzle straight at the woman's face.

"Please, don't," the woman whimpered. She edged backward until her hips hit the table.

"You—" the Director said softly. "But I thought you . . ."

"It's my baby that is at stake here," Taki said calmly. "We can't take chances, remember?" With that, he squeezed the trigger.

The woman's eyes rolled back into her head. The room shook as the gunshot reverberated around the little room. The target took a shower of bullets from Wickerman's MAC-11. Half of the Director's face was blown to bits. Makie covered her face with her hands.

Mike grabbed the woman, whose features were

changing by the second, and hauled her to the other end of the room. Her flesh looked like it was melting, and Mike fired. She went down in a heap.

The Director remained where he was, dark bluish goo pouring from his wound. His lips twisted and curved into a cruel smile. He had all the appearance of a human being, except that no human would be able to smile that way.

Then *it* came forward. There was another roar, one much bigger than the one from Wickerman's gun, as the body of the man in white was flung backward. The invader flew from the Director's body, hit the wall, and fell flat onto the floor. What was left of it received another bullet from Taki's gun.

"Good job, Wickerman," said the Boss, eyes on the corpse.

Mike scratched his head with the end of his gun. "Maybe I don't deserve to be here. For all I knew, they both seemed normal."

"Me, too," Lee said. "How did you know, Wickerman?"

Wickerman said nothing, only returned his MAC-11 to its holster.

"What happened to the real Director?" the Boss inquired.

Taki was about to answer when heavy footfalls

sounded in the hall, along with the noise of a hospital bed being rolled away. "Where are they headed?" he said to the Boss. "What's down the hall?"

"ICU," the Boss replied. "I'll see what's going on."

From the corner of his eye, Taki watched the Boss reach for the phone. He wondered how the family had broken the shield.

"I'm not done," Don Sharp said to Wickerman. "How did you know? Did you know when they broke into the building?"

"He was—" Taki began.

Wickerman stopped him. With half-hooded eyes, he looked around at everyone. "I felt them approach."

Mike snorted. "How did you, when none of us could? The Shus are masters at shielding themselves."

Wickerman's stony expression did not change. "My mother was attacked by the family, seven thousand years ago. I was the result of their violation."

Mike looked up at him, embarrassed. "Oh, man, I didn't mean . . ."

"Sorry. That was a dumb question," Don said. "No hard feelings?" He held out his hand. Wickerman hesitated, then shook it firmly.

"Wickerman is one of our best agents from the other side. He has not made one mistake ever since he took this position four thousand years ago. And

he undergoes genetic examination on the other side every six months."

"Hey, we're cool. We're a team, right?" Mike said with a wink. "My stupid brother deserves a slap in the face. I'll take care of it later."

The Boss hung up the phone. "The Director is going to be all right. "They have him in the ICU now. The creature bit him nearly to death, but it was in too much of a hurry to finish him off. We can bring him back."

Don returned his gun to its holder and leaned on the table. "He made the mistake of staying in the Director's office. That's why he had to answer my call."

"But why did he say he hadn't told her to bring the coffee? We wouldn't have suspected a thing if he said yes," Mike said.

"Perhaps he thought if he diverted the attention to his daughter, he could keep himself safe," Taki replied.

"That was his daughter?" Don said. "So much for family loyalty. They could have destroyed us all."

"They think we're foolish," Taki said, twisting his lips into a sneer.

"Joke's over," the Boss barked. "Brace yourself. It's going to be hell."

2

THE EARTH-SHATTERING noise came and went as the last train to Tokyo rumbled by. With a big, alcohol-scented burp, the homeless man pushed his hat over his eyes. Time for much-needed sleep, he thought. He lay under a railway bridge, about two hundred meters from Shiodome Station. If he followed the tracks in the direction of Hamamatsucho, he would find the Shiodome train yard. If he kept going, eventually he would arrive at Hamarikyu Gardens.

Kuragaki had been living on the streets for nearly two years. Here, under the bridge, there was a roof over his head—though sometimes it was a little too loud—a blanket, and other necessities of daily life. It could be hard during the winter but was nice and cozy in summer. It was the most comfortable place in the world in which to live.

Winding down for the night, Kuragaki made a mental note to check the back alleys of the Ginza tomorrow. He could fill half a bottle with the liquor he would find, left in the bottles drunks threw away. The thought made him happy.

Kuragaki was content, hoping he would strike gold

the next day. A faint clanking noise made the drunk open his eyes. Even half asleep, he knew what it was; one of the bottles he had lined up alongside the wall, his collection of liquor bottles, had fallen and hit the ground.

With a yawn, Kuragaki got up. Part of him wanted to stay there and sleep, but he got up anyway. He knew which bottle had fallen. The seventh bottle from the left. It always fell over for some reason. His home was right below the midsection of the bridge. He started walking in the direction of Shiodome. Seven steps and he stopped. He stared at the wall. It was dark, but some of the streetlight made it to the middle of the tunnel. It was enough to see the stone wall, looming in the dark. Except for one spot, about two meters to his right. It was a dark patch, like a shadow stuck to the wall, completely blotting it out. Kuragaki stared into the darkness, wondering what it was.

Something came out of it, as if the darkness were a cave entrance.

Not just one something, but a group.

Kuragaki scoffed; he knew all too well what it was. Demons. *They never give up, do they,* he thought. He put out his hands and moved closer to the dark. Breathing softly, he sent his Psy Power rushing into it.

The shadows backed away, toward their hole. A second later, Kuragaki was assaulted by a tremendous

wave of energy, radiating hatred, but he took it in stride. He was used to it. When it subsided, he realized his skin was a little tender. Maybe some of it had peeled off. No biggie. He cranked up his Psy Power.

Some of them vanished, and others went back the way they came. Back to their world. The rock wall was normal again, just flat gray stone. Kuragaki gave a sigh. There were four thousand more places like this in the world. Like an alleyway in New York City's Harlem, or the murky space behind the fire extinguisher on the top floor of the United Nations building. Another in one corner of a Vietnamese forest, and another in a cave in the middle of Mount Everest. Some stayed where they were, some moved from place to place. It was the latter type that the Black Guards sought. There was always a lag between finding one and the mobilization of the guards; fortunately, demons did not know where passages would turn up, which made it easier for the Black Guards to make a plan and strike first. Those demons that traveled light, like the ones Kuragaki had just dispatched, were low level. There was a theory that there was a relationship between level and quantity, but they would have to wait for the Black Guard Quantum Theory to be completed to know for sure.

But the extremists from the other side, demons from higher levels, were hard to beat. They knew that

guards posted to blockade their entrance were especially good, so they came prepared. It wasn't the first time that the murky corner under the railway bridge, not far from Shiodome Station, had been used as an entrance. But it had been quiet since the invasion, six hundred and some-odd years ago. Two of the greatest Black Guards at the time had used up their Psy Power pushing them back and died.

After a study on the passage conducted in the year Meiji 18, it had been shut down. But it had been reopened when five hundred one-kilo bombs and countless incendiary grenades were dropped on the area during the great Tokyo air raid in Showa 20. Ever since then, the demons had constantly attempted to sneak in. Fortunately only low-level demons had been sighted, requiring no more than four resident guards, including Kuragaki.

The sound of footfalls echoed in the tunnel. Kuragaki whirled around. A white light emerged from the Shiodome exit, headed his way—a flashlight. It was followed by a human in a gray uniform. A cop.

"Found something?" the cop asked in a low voice.

Kuragaki gave him a nod. The cop was another of the four guards posted there. "It's getting more frequent. It may only be low-level demons for now, but you never know what they're going to send next time."

"We'll be all right," said the officer, casting the

flashlight's beam about the area. "I've got to go. No one's tending the police booth."

"Take care," Kuragaki said teasingly.

The cop lived in an apartment in Akau. He had four mouths to feed, which must have been hard to manage even on a Black Guard's salary.

The cop turned to leave. He took a few steps, then stopped. Chills ran down his spine, but these were not normal chills. He felt his Psy Power flowing from his body, through his spinal cord. Even before he turned around, he knew that he was doomed.

Kuragaki faced the wall, shoulders slumped. Or rather, Kuragaki's clothes faced the wall. With nothing to fill them out, his hat fell on top of the pile. His body was gone.

The cop pulled a Nimbus revolver from the holster on his hip. It was already loaded with his Psychic Power. That was all he had left—every last bit of the Psy Power in his body was gone.

He saw the passage in the wall. Something was there. With both hands, he held up the revolver and pulled the trigger. A flash of orange light lit up the darkness, but only for a fleeting moment. The bullet hit the passage and was knocked back with a hiss like a steak sizzling on the grill. The bullet was full of Psy Power; it was supposed to go through the passage, not come back. The passage—or something inside the

passage—had sucked out all of the Psy Power, just the way it had from the cop's body.

A dull noise came from inside the passage. It sounded like . . . chewing. Something flew from the dark hole in the wall. Some things. They looked like twigs. The cop was so preoccupied with the sound and the fact that he had no more Psychic Power, he did not have the presence of mind to pull the trigger again. Then he realized the things falling from the hole were not twigs.

They were rib bones. These were quickly followed by two long thigh bones and a pair from the upper arm. They lay on the ground in front of the passage, forming a pile. They were not just dropping, but flying out in spurts, as if the dark pool of shadow on the wall were spitting the bones out.

Finally a large, chunky white bone fell onto the bone pile, and the cop knew it was the last one. The two gaping holes in the skull where Kuragaki's eyes had once been glared at him. The cop ran for it, not knowing what else to do. He took out his nightstick and swung it up. *I'm going to beat it,* the cop swore to himself, though he didn't know how he could without any Psy Power.

A ball of energy burst from the passage opening and hit him like knives. Pain sliced across him just below his eyes, across the middle of his nose, beneath his jaw. It hit him across the collarbones, his stomach,

the tops of his thighs, his kneecaps, and his ankles—the cop felt like he was being diced to bits.

A few minutes later, another homeless man walked by and found two piles of clothing abandoned in the street. Thinking he had struck gold, he gladly put them into his sack and took off as quickly as he had arrived. He did not notice the two piles of bones, nor the shadow walking away in the direction of Shiodome.

The homeless man didn't know it, but he was the luckiest man in the world.

3

"So there was no blood? Just bones?" Mike asked, his hands gripping the wheel of the Celica as they raced up Highway One toward Nihonbashi.

Renzaburo Taki nodded. "That's right. Headquarters is at their wits' end. Kuragaki's Psy Power was one of the strongest in Japan. They never actually measured it, but I have a feeling his was stronger than mine."

"Wow." Mike gave a low whistle. "This is the worst. Besides, it's not the strength of Psy Power that is important, it's how you use it. His bones were withered and dried, like they were five thousand years old."

No reply from Taki. He knew Mike should know

what it meant: that all of Kuragaki's Psychic Power had been sucked from his body. Once that happened to a Black Guard, he would die of old age no matter how young he was. Human candidates had to fuse their life energies with their Psychic Power in order to become Black Guards. Psy Power could act as a great healer, but if it were gone, it meant death.

"There's only one demon that is capable of such a thing in our records," Taki said calmly, as if this kind of thing happened every day. "It was in Greece, during the time of Pericles. The Parthenon was built to seal up the monster in the year 438 B.C. Its victim's bones were aged nine hundred and twenty years, even though the man was only twenty-two. Kuragaki's bones came back with carbon dating of *five thousand* years old. This thing is much more powerful than the demon from Greece. I don't know what we're dealing with here."

"The Shu family. So terrible." Mike's hand trembled so much that the Celica shook.

"Watch it, Mike," Makie said calmly from the backseat.

Mike straightened up, laughing. "Sorry about that." Fortunately it was 7:00 A.M.—too early for many cars to be on the road. Last night they had come to the conclusion that Makie could not hide inside the Hospital. The building's defense shield had been stabilized, but they were still struggling to get over the

shock that it had been broken so easily. That the enemy had gotten to the Director was almost as big a shock. As long as no one knew how they had gotten in, there wouldn't be a moment of peace, and Makie certainly wasn't safe there.

There was a Black Guard facility in Hashimotocho, a closed ward that housed patients in the event that the local Hospital was short of beds. It was not for patients in critical condition. Those with traumatic problems would have to be chemically frozen until more beds became available.

The science of freezing had been developed by the collaborative efforts of both worlds. Experts had created a chemically processed cloth that could cover a person's entire body and freeze it safely. So it would be easy to use, the cloth was made into clothes, which were manufactured at the Asia Directorate General for Science and Freezing, located underground in the Pamir Mountains in Central Asia. The hardest part of making the cloth was the weaving process. A single piece of cloth two meters square required two tons of silk. A team of experts from both sides tended to it every day without a break for three years. Only thirty pieces were currently in existence, and Taki had an idea that perhaps the cloth would be useful in fighting the Shu family.

"Any minute now," Mike said. He glanced at the

sign that said they were near the Edobashi Interchange and grinned. "Ha. How funny. Not a car in sight."

"What?" Taki looked around. They were the only car on the road. Traffic was normally not as chaotic at this hour as it would be later, but Mike was right. There had been a few other cars before; now they were nowhere to be seen. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and he felt tension creeping into his back.

"What's wrong, Taki?" Makie asked. Her tone was even, as if she were chanting. Which was normal for Makie; emotion never showed in her voice.

"Eldritch space," Taki replied. "They tucked the other cars away. They're gearing up for an attack. Mike, get help."

"Got it," said Mike. He reached for the car phone and stopped. "Uh-oh. We've got company."

His urgent yell filled Taki with alarm, and he looked up. An elliptical object sat in the road about fifty meters ahead. The car was barreling straight toward it, getting closer by the second. "What is that?"

They all had the same thought—the Shus.

"What do we do?" Mike asked. "Run straight into it?"

"No. We can't take any chances," Taki said. "Stop the car twenty meters short of it."

"We're past that."

"So stop now!" Taki yelled.

The car screeched to a halt. They were fifteen meters from the object.

"Wait." Mike stopped Taki as he tried to open the door. "You're a husband. Stay with your wife. I'll go."

Taki continued to open the door. "It's all right. I'm a Black Guard."

"There may be more than one. Someone has to request backup. Two jobs for you and one for me. Mine's easier."

"All right," Taki said. He knew it was useless to protest, and that Mike was right.

Mike got out of the car and moved toward the egg-shaped thing. Taki opened his window and stuck his six-inch M29 through. With a gleam in his eye, he aimed his gun at the object on the road. It was about seventy centimeters in length, thirty in height. The ivory-colored surface glowed dully under the morning sun.

It wasn't just egg-shaped. It was an egg. Not necessarily an egg produced by a biological organism. If it were, it should have a mother. And what kind of creature would drop an egg in the middle of the expressway?

Mike came to a stop three meters from the egg. That was as close as he could get. Another step and it would be hard for him to avoid an attack if—or rather when—it came.

A small sound came from the egg. Taki squinted, trying to get a better look. A crack began to spread across the egg's surface like a spiderweb. A piece of the shell fell to the pavement.

Mike stuck his right hand into his back pocket and pulled out a bottle of liquor—a flat, second-rate beer.

Taki aimed his gun at the center of the egg. The ivory fragment floated up in the air. Taki had seen that coming. But what happened next was absolutely shocking.

The egg shattered, pieces falling like rain. Amid the scattered fragments stood a human infant, just short of thirty centimeters in height.

Mike stepped back, perhaps making an association with Makie's pregnancy by reflex.

Suddenly Taki felt the air closing in on him. His skin itched. Something was coming.

"How interesting. Let's celebrate the birth of a new life," Mike said. He raised his beer and poured it onto the shell and the infant. "Amen—" Mike Sharp stopped, frozen. Something strange was happening to his body. He couldn't move.

"No!" Taki tried to pull the trigger on his M29. He couldn't. Suddenly it seemed so rigid, so heavy. Frustrated, Taki glanced at the trigger and was stunned. He held the trigger only by the tip of his index finger.

His fingers were shrinking. So was the rest of him, he realized as his M29 dropped to the ground. He could not hold it in his hands anymore. They were too small. Taki realized with horror that the same thing was happening to Mike out on the highway.

"Taki . . ."

The child-like voice that called from the backseat was Makie's. He looked up once again. The infant's body was also transforming, but in reverse. A thick growth of black hair covered his fuzzy head as he lengthened like a piece of taffy. The infant was growing into an adolescent boy.

No. Not quite. The flat chest developed two soft mounds of flesh; the hips spread out nicely. Where the smooth thighs came together appeared the cleft of a vagina. It was a woman.

"Makie . . ." Taki called her name in his now high-pitched voice. The newly grown woman looked exactly like Makie.

A psychic voice blasted in the heads of Taki, Mike, and the real Makie. *"Hello, Black Guards. I am Inn, a member of the Shu family. I have just been born into this world. I chose to be a female."*

Taki had already worked that much out for himself, but nothing could have prepared them for such wicked sorcery. Like a chick maturing into a chicken,

like a baby growing up to resemble its mother, the infant became an adult with Makie's face. It had chosen her as its parent!

Taki's Psy Power had already been churning inside him when the assailant's shrinking spell hit his body. But apparently it was not strong enough to halt the shrinking process.

The imitation Makie stood in the road, naked, and let out a haughty laugh.

The more it matured, the more Mike and Taki regressed. Before they knew it, they were down to the original size of the freshly hatched infant.

Inn, of the Shu family. *What power,* Taki thought.

"The shrinking will not stop until you become a fetus in a womb," Inn said smugly. *"And then you both will turn back into a sperm and egg. Or I can put you out of your misery right now."* If the Black Guards, now infants, understood what was being said, they made no indication.

The naked Makie look-alike strode briskly toward the car, her hair blowing in the wind. A shadow blocked her path, not so much walking as stumbling toward Inn, then stopping in front of her. Inn looked the wholesome, blue-eyed little boy up and down. It was Mike Sharp.

Inn did not even blink at the bottle of beer in Mike's stubby, pale hand. She threw her head back

and laughed the most horrendous laughter they had ever heard.

"You want to be the first to go, little man? Hmm?"

"That's right." Mike's voice was small and child-like, but there was still the toughness of a Black Guard behind it.

Pure disgust distorted the cool beauty of Inn's borrowed features. She reached up as if she were going to swat Mike like a bug, and blue sparks shot from her body. Soon she was engulfed in flames. Inn opened her mouth and screamed—a sound the real Makie would never make. The fire burned with a heat that was impossible in the physical world.

"How do you like the taste of my Psy Power?" The mighty Mike Sharp, now in the form of a child, grinned a mischievous grin. "Psy Power is not just for knives and guns, chump. I can also put it into liquids. Now eat this!"

Mike raised his chubby right hand and smashed the beer bottle onto the road. It shattered, and the remaining beer caught fire. The flames divided, forming belts of fire that flew at Inn. Inn, engulfed in flames, fell onto the road. Her body turned into a sizzling torch. The fire raged, generating a hot wind. Mike Sharp's laughter soared higher than the reach of the flames.

Taki felt his Psychic Power gradually stabilize as his body quickly resumed its normal size.

Inn's vindictive voice broke into his thoughts. "*You win. I am leaving for now. But the demon female will not reclaim her maturity. I'm keeping it. She will not be able to have a child.*"

Another lance of fire pierced through the column of flames as Inn's condescending laughter echoed and faded out.

"Piece of shit got away." Mike didn't sound disappointed. "Part of its body was in the passage it used to get here. I didn't have enough Psy Power left to close it," Mike explained. "That's how it escaped."

Taki nodded, straightening his disheveled clothes. It was fortunate for Taki and Mike they were Black Guard. Any lesser being would have ended up mentally damaged. Neither Taki nor Mike looked pleased with the victory. They were both in shock; they had never felt such wicked power before.

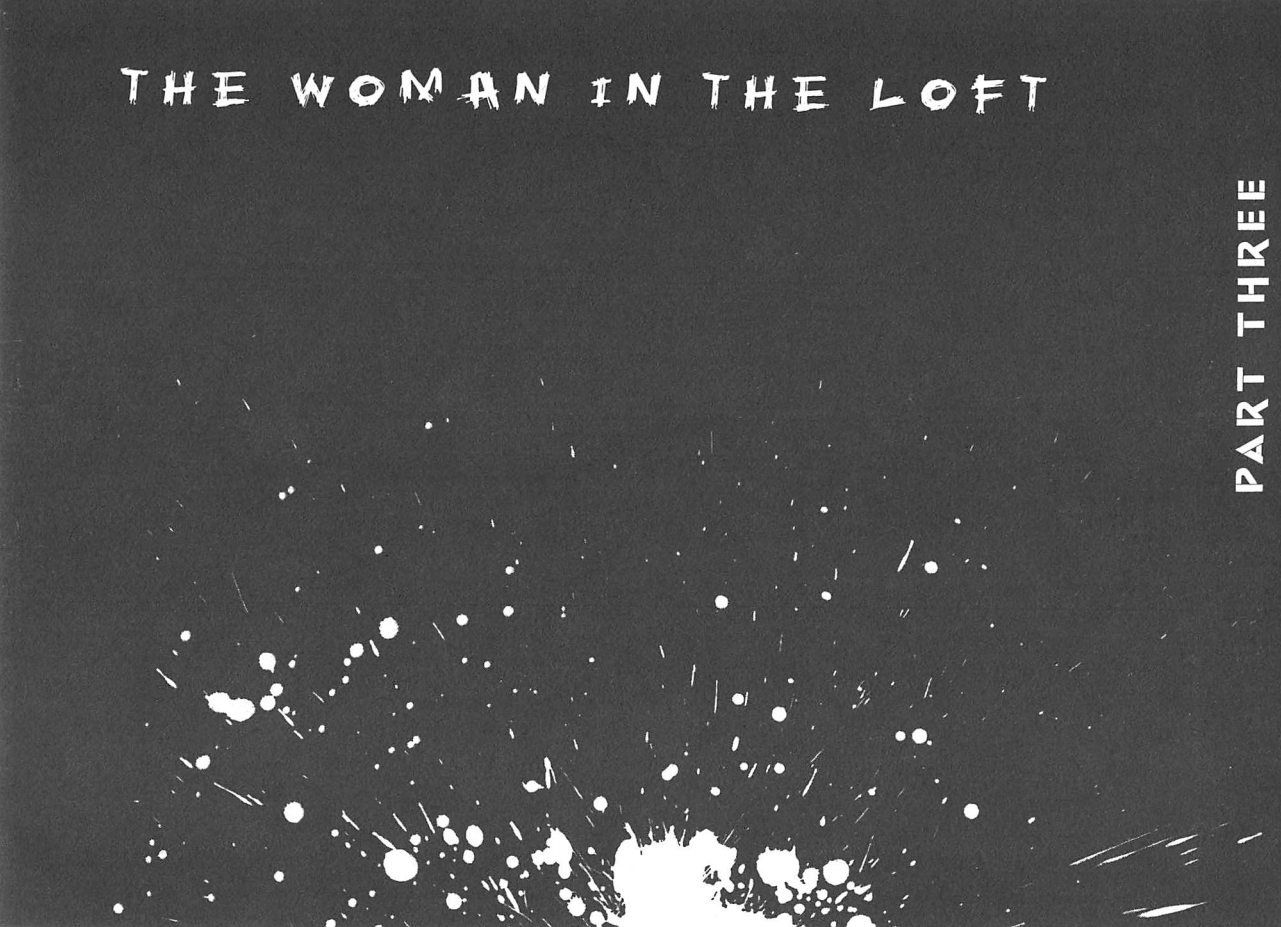
Not everything was back to normal. Taki's fingernails were still small, and Mike's usual crew cut was now a child's mop-top.

"Oh my God. Makie." Taki raced to the back of the car and opened the back door.

Mike rushed to his side. When he saw what was there, he grimaced. On the seat sat a small, dried-out thing like a miniature mummy. It was a three-month-old fetus, about the size of a pinky finger.

THE WOMAN IN THE LOFT

PART THREE



1

THERE WAS not a soul on the tree-edged path. The area was thick with the usual quiet of early morning. Soon enough, the street would be crowded with people commuting to work and students heading to school. The park, located in the middle of the city, provided the city-dwellers an urban refuge.

Hibiya Park, with its beautiful greenery, was situated opposite the Imperial Palace, overlooking Yurakucho and the Ginza to the east and Kasumigaseki and Nagatacho, where many government offices were located, to the west.

Two men walked on the turf near a large fountain. One was dark and serious, the other fair and upbeat. Light and dark. They were complete opposites. It was extraordinary how the gray-sky mood of one was canceled out by the sunshine of the other.

"Still nothing, eh?" Don said, looking at the sky.

As usual, there was no reply from Wickerman. He stared straight ahead with eyes of steel.

"I suppose not all of the Shus went after Taki. Here we are, walking in broad daylight, and nothing. What are they waiting for?" Don shrugged, as if in reply to his own question. As soon as Taki, Mike, and Makie had left, Don and Wickerman had taken off on their own to try to flush out more of the Shu family. After what happened at the Hospital, they were certain the family was watching their every move. They had just awakened from thousands of years of sleep; there should be a lot to take in, considering how much the world had changed during their slumber. The Boss had not ruled out the possibility that it wasn't just the Shu family but extremists from the other side that had ambushed them earlier. Some of them were in cahoots with the family.

Don and Wickerman walked along the street, waiting for them to show up, instead of hiding. That was their invitation to the Shus to show themselves. They were hired to protect Makie. Would the Shu family, or

those close to them, let Don and Wickerman walk around unharmed? Very unlikely. But they had tried driving up and down the road that linked Azabu and the Ginza for three hours and nothing had happened. So they had gotten out of the car and gone into the park to get some fresh air.

A fresh but hot August breeze tousled their hair.

"Nice wind," Don said to Wickerman in a way that asked for an affirmation.

"They're here," Wickerman mumbled.

"What? But I don't feel anything—" Don stopped himself. This was Wickerman, a Black Guard who had the Shus' genes in his blood. Don had cursed his own incompetence after witnessing how fast Wickerman could locate enemies. His wary eyes kept tabs on both worlds and let nothing go unobserved.

Wickerman seemed to be getting a definite vibe. "They're in the grass . . . Let's burn them out."

"What? How?" Don asked, wide-eyed.

Wickerman had a slender iron bar in his right hand. It appeared to be a regular police baton, except it was elliptical, not round. There was a square hole about three centimeters wide near the top.

"Very nasty, this one," Wickerman noted. He stayed perfectly still and alert, like a hunting dog that had picked up a scent.

"Is it one of the Shus?" Don asked.

"Maybe . . . Stay off the turf while I fight, all right?"

"You got it," Don said, still not being able to feel any presence. He wasn't about to argue; there was nothing he could do. He just had to count on Wickerman and his ability to search for their auras.

"Coming." Wickerman turned slowly on the spot. His right hand danced suddenly upward, and a silver blade appeared from the end of the baton. He threw it, and it turned in a graceful arc before sticking into the grass, standing straight up.

Don jumped out of the way, onto the path. In his right hand was his Colt .45. Fresh ammo had already been loaded, and the safety was off, ready to shoot.

He turned his attention to Wickerman. The man in black had not moved an inch since he pierced the turf. The enemy was lurking in the grass. Or was he?

Suddenly Wickerman collapsed. He slumped to the ground, silver sparks whirling around him. The grass flattened around him, forming a circle.

Don could not see what Wickerman was fighting. He reached out, grabbed his baton, and surged upward, his blade slicing through the air nearby. Something black and slithery had jumped at his ankle. Whatever it was, the silver blade had cut it in half. Wickerman was knocked aside and sprawled on the ground.

Don rushed to his side. "What happened?" He

looked closer and jumped back, a look of repulsion on his face. A strange, reptile-like creature was wrapped around Wickerman's ankle. The cross-section showed it to have a pentagon shape; but before Don could get a better look, it trembled and formed into a slimy mass, just before the whole creature was absorbed into the ground.

"What the—?" Although Don was able to confirm Wickerman's safety, part of him was still in shock. He wasn't sure what he had just witnessed. "Wickerman, did it bite you?"

He was referring to the three black blotches on Wickerman's sock, around the ankle. Without waiting for a reply, Don lifted Wickerman into his arms. He slumped over, his pale face darkening to a bluish purple. Saliva poured out of his mouth, and he was not breathing.

"Oh my God, he's been poisoned," Don said. He put Wickerman back on the ground.

"*That is correct,*" an eldritch voice said from above Don's head.

At the sound of the voice, the hairs on the back of his neck stood up like spikes. "Sneaky son of a bitch," Don said. He turned around.

The voice spoke again. *"I am Shu Hoki. Your friend was bitten by my pet. You can be its playmate, too."*

"Sorry, I'm not in the mood for child's play," Don said, standing tall. His chest puffed out beneath his shirt. "Your pet seems useless out of the grass. Now come out, boy." Don's voice was low and hollow. He raised the Colt in his free hand, pointing it to the place he knew the enemy to be. He had located it by its voice.

With a burst of loud noise, orange sparks flashed in the bright morning sunshine of the park. In front of Don stood a tall Sugi tree, its trunk easily two meters in diameter. The huge tree broke in two as the bullet entered it, splitting it in half. It had happened so fast it was over before the earth had the chance to feel the vibration.

"That's some power you have there, Black Guard." The voice echoed in Don's head. There was nothing special about the bullet itself; it was just a regular .45 hardballer. But not even an antitank rifle or a .460 Weatherby Magnum, the standard elephant gun, would be a match for the force of Don's plain bullet. The tiny chunk of iron, weighing only fifteen grams, not only cut the huge tree trunk in half but burned the air as it flew to the target. The white fire, however, gave light off but not heat. That was how powerful Don Sharp's Psy Power was.

Without even bothering to see his handiwork, Don turned his back to the completely destroyed tree and

ran. The park was again quiet, as if denying everything that had happened. Only Wickerman's darkening corpse on the ground testified to anything out of the ordinary.

2

THERE WAS no sign of the enemy hot on his trail. Still, Don could not shake off the feeling that the reptile was nearby, waiting for a chance to jump him. That blow was sheer luck. He would have not been able to deliver it if the enemy had not spoken. Now it completely eluded him. It had thrown him off scent. *What else did it have up its sleeve?*

The amphitheater loomed before him. Don supposed there would not be anyone there at this hour, but a young couple sat in the cone-shaped open-air auditorium, arms wrapped around each other. The girl, looking over her boyfriend's shoulder, saw Don and winked.

Cheeky girl, Don thought. He winked back and continued down the aisle, toward the stage. Something jumped out from between the seats and tangled around his ankle. He focused his Psy Power, and it broke into a million bits.

"Sorry, these boots have a titanium plate inside."

He came to the last step, looked around, and charged onto the stage.

There was a groan of pain nearby, and a voice echoed in Don's head. *"You've come this far for me? My, I admire your tenacity."*

What looked like a thin plastic bag floated into the air from off stage. He aimed his .45 in the direction of the voice. "I came to this park for a reason, you know. You have a lot of catching up to do. This place brings your power down. It's called sanctuary. This part of the park is holy ground, formed by the planet Earth herself to defeat invaders."

Millions of lines of energy existed throughout the planet, like telephone cables. It was a fact supported by occult scientists. Where the lines crossed was holy ground, and usually churches or temples were built upon the intersections. This phenomenon did not escape the notice of the Black Guard. Since ancient times they had been supporting the construction of temples in these places. Many were disguised in order to lure enemies onto the grounds. Hibiya Park was an especially powerful one of those places.

The weird entity, looking like a breathing plastic bag, wriggled across the stage. The purified energy must be exerting its power on the assaulter. Through

the thing's thin skin, Don saw organs that defied the laws of Earth's physics.

"This is it, Shu. You picked the wrong time and wrong people." Don laughed, his eyes shining with cruelty. The Colt in his right hand was pointed directly at the enemy. "Bye-bye."

Before he could pull the trigger, a force gripped Don's hand. It twisted the gun around so that the muzzle pointed at Don's forehead. The color drained from his face. Not because he had lost control of his hand but because he was losing his Psychic Power. He felt all of his energy gushing into the gun. All seven remaining bullets had Psy Power in them. Don knew all too well what they could do to him. What he had left of his bodily control was snuffed by his own tremendous Psy Power. His index finger was a second away from slipping. He felt the invisible grip of his tormentor and understood what had happened.

The power of the holy ground had been compromised. The energy was turning against him. *Is this the power of the Shus?* Don wondered, panicked. He was being pushed by energy that was once holy, now evil. With his own sweat streaking into his eyes, he saw the couple, still sitting in their seats. They looked terrified.

Don finally noticed the attacker was gone from the stage. *Where did it go?* He struggled to keep his finger from squeezing the trigger and ending his life. An

ear-piercing shriek from the other side of the auditorium broke the spell the enemy had woven over him. He broke free and dropped his gun to his side with a sigh of relief.

He turned toward the place the scream had come from and witnessed the girl tumbling down the steps toward him. Her companion remained where he was, a stunned look on his face. A man stood at the top of the steps, shadow shimmering in the haze of the summer heat. Don gasped; it was Wickerman. What was he doing here?

Before any doubt about Wickerman's sudden appearance registered in his mind, Don jumped off the stage and raced up the steps. He skidded to a stop three meters in front of Wickerman, leveling his Colt at Wickerman's chest. Don realized he could not tell whether Wickerman was real or just another Shu family trick.

His doubt was resolved quickly as Wickerman raised his gun and fired—at the girl. The bullet, loaded with Psy Power, ripped into her. The boy let out a tearful scream. All three men watched as the girl's body started to melt, transforming into a mass of organic matter that gave off a rotten stink.

Don grabbed the boy by the shoulder and pulled him around so they were face-to-face. "How long were you two together?"

The boy did not meet Don's gaze but kept watching his girlfriend's remains over his shoulder. "She's melting . . . she's melting," the boy whimpered. He was impeccably dressed in a dark blue blazer, like an Ivy League student.

Don pressed his fingers into the boy's shoulder. That got his attention.

"How long?" Don repeated the question.

"We were together for two years. We shared an apartment."

"I wonder when it took her over," Don mumbled to himself. "You didn't see anything different about her?" The boy shook his head.

Wickerman stomped down the steps to stand with his partner. "Maybe she was born to become their vessel, in case the family awakened. Born a human, grew up, fell in love, doomed to be possessed by a monster."

Life is cruel, Don thought.

The boy finally seemed to see Don and Wickerman for the first time. "You . . . you . . . who are you people? Why did you kill Yoko?" He looked at what was left of his girlfriend again. "We were going to get married."

Don and Wickerman did not answer. They turned their backs on the boy and walked away. There was no point in trying to explain. Humans who got caught in the crossfire were bound to become unhappy.

3

NIGHT. TIME for demons to get active.

Somewhere a voice mumbles in the night. It sounds like someone chanting, casting a spell. The chanter's neighbor would never believe it was a holy ritual, offering the neighbor to a demon.

No one who knows better walks in the Ginza past three in the morning. They will not make it home if they do. The rattling sound in the distance sounds like a metropolitan-area Tokyo tram, but it cannot be. The Tokyo tram is long gone, abolished years before. And yet, here it is. A drunk looks at it through a haze of liquor. Why not get on it? It has to arrive at some place, after all. His alcohol-soaked body is in desperate need of a place to sleep, a chair to rest his aching back. The conductor waves at him.

What the drunk does not know is that the tram and the conductor do not exist. He does not notice that the conductor's face is ghostly pale. The drunk cannot resist, and he gets on, never to return.

Atop a tall building, a red light flickered on and off, warning planes away. The lines of the building below

the light were steep slopes, like the curve of a skirt. It was Tokyo Tower.

In one corner of Tokyo Bay, a human-shaped shadow emerged in the square where lines of warehouses stood alongside the pier. The man was calm and controlled, in opposition to the tension-filled air that surrounded him. In his suit and tie, he looked out of place here by the docks in the middle of the night. Even though he wore leather shoes, he walked on the pavement without a sound. He stopped in front of a warehouse, reached down, and grasped the edge of the roll-up door. He pulled it halfway open and let himself in.

A huge space welcomed him, so vast that if he were in a hurry to get to the other end, he would need a car. The man, who was Taki, straightened his clothes.

A man emerged from the shadows and greeted Taki. It was Lee. He pointed toward the ceiling as Taki locked the door. There was a room upstairs, the gesture said. Taki nodded in understanding and made his way toward the stairway, ten meters ahead. He crept up the stairs and into the hall. Ten doors greeted him, five on each side.

Taki went to the center door on the left-hand side and knocked lightly.

"Come in," a cool voice answered.

Taki stepped in and closed the door behind him. He immediately felt the room was charged with unusual atmosphere. It was not as big as downstairs but comfortably spacious, about fifty tatami mats in size. It would cost thousands of yen a month to rent an apartment of the same size. Lofts like this were popular among young artists like painters or film directors. But this was a big storage room.

Of course, Taki had not rented it for himself. The room was a little too bleak and impersonal for his tastes. There was nothing in the room except for large windows on the south and west walls, the lightbulb on the ceiling, and a bed beneath the windows.

The occupant of the room could have been a young artist. She looked like one. She leaned against the wall by the south-facing window, looking at the gloom settling over the bay. She did not even turn when Taki closed the door. Her indifference did not bother Taki at all; he was used to it.

"Wickerman and Don were attacked," Taki said, surveying the room. The air stirred and broke against Taki's body when the shadow turned to face him.

"Are they dead?" Makie asked. She was her usual self, beautiful and cool. There was no trace of the lumpy fetus she had been turned into during the attack on the expressway.

"You like stories about death," Taki noted, amused.

"But they're safe. Wickerman was poisoned and died once, but he came back. They chased him away."

Makie shook her head. "Who says it was a he? You never learn how to think like us. You think your side of the world is at the center."

Taki wasn't sure whose world she was referring to—the human or the male. She returned her gaze to the scene outside the window. "They think I'm a fetus. I don't have to be cooped up here, do I?"

"They're not that easy to fool, you know that." Taki crossed the room and stood behind Makie. "The family had been sealed for seven thousand years. They have developed a very keen eye. You have to stay here for a long while."

"Bummer . . . but there's nothing I can do, is there?" Makie muttered.

Taki looked over her shoulder. The loft/warehouse stood by the Ooi Pier. Tokyo Bay was ten meters beyond the road. The window commanded the view of West Tokyo. To the north were Shinagawa Pier and Harumi; to the south, Haneda and Kawasaki.

A star leaped across the skies. A shooting star only Taki and Makie could see. It disappeared, leaving fading trails.

Taki wondered if Makie was looking at it or at something far, far away. "How's it going?" he asked. He could not think of anything else to say.

Makie's reply was short and to the point. "Fine."

Taki could not tell what she meant by "fine." Did she mean she was just okay? Or was there a spark of maternity in her?

"It hasn't moved. It's still asleep," Makie said, as if answering Taki's unasked questions.

"Let it sleep all it wants. It's good for it."

"It's a drag," Makie muttered. She glanced over her shoulder at Taki. "What are we going to do with the baby?"

"What do you mean?" Taki asked.

"What if it wants the same job as ours?"

Taki looked into her eyes. He thought he saw something different there, some new spark that hadn't been there before. "You're worried about that?"

"A little," Makie said.

"So you think like a human after all?"

Makie shrugged. There was an embarrassed look on her face. "I'm getting to know more about your world."

Taki knew that although their minds worked differently on many levels, those from the other side had emotions like humans—love, hope, hate, joy, sorrow. Otherwise it would be impossible for Black Guards from the two sides to work together. However, they did not necessarily share the same ideals. In the demons' world there was no such thing as total honesty, and

even though they certainly had emotions, they rarely expressed them.

What about maternal instinct? Taki wondered. Was she feeling maternal love for her own child? That remained a mystery. Expectant mothers and fathers from the other side were supposed to be left alone, so there was no way to run medical tests on them. No way to solve the mystery.

Taki did not pry. He had no idea what one wrong move could do to her body, to the secretive world inside her. "Still the same date?" he asked nonchalantly. He didn't want to give away how worried about her he was. She wouldn't understand.

"Give or take."

"Everything's fine for now?"

"With me, yes. But it was you who said the Shu family was not simple," Makie said. "How long things stay fine remains to be seen."

Taki shrugged. "We've done everything in our power to make this place safe. Lee's downstairs. His Psy Power is stronger than mine."

"He's famous for killing one hundred at once, you know."

Taki had heard the story, which sounded like a spectacular act no Black Guard could follow. At the tender age of sixteen, Lee had confronted one hundred and four malevolent spirits trying to invade China by

climbing the Great Wall. None of the demons made it to the top. Lee had stopped every last one, using only his Psychic Power. Afterward, the top section of the wall had to undergo major repairs in order to scrape off some of the demons that had been splattered along the stone. He had destroyed one hundred of the demons, and the other four were still part of the wall. Ignorance was bliss for those tourists who put their hands or head between their bared teeth.

"The Sharp brothers, Wickerman, and Lee. They're the best. And you've got me. What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Makie said. She stroked her left cheek absently.

"Anything you want to do before you deliver?"

Makie sounded bored as usual. "No."

"Are you sure? Anything could happen. Your body is adjusting to this world's physics. It could interfere with your biorhythms during the delivery. Can you go through with it?"

"This is my first time with something like this. I've been learning a lot of things." *She is preparing to have the baby in her own way,* Taki thought. *I should have known.* "I'm staying downstairs from today on. That make you feel any better?"

Makie gave a small smile, which for her was equivalent to a beaming grin. "Much better."

"We set this place up so that the Psy Power is unde-

tectable. So as long as you stay, no one will find you. Don't do anything stupid."

Makie leaned on the bed without a reply and sighed.

It must be killing her, to stay here and do nothing while we protect her. A momentary nervous feeling rose inside Taki. The Hospital had run some tests on Makie, none of which revealed what effect the fetus had on her body. The psychic CT scan did not show the fetus. In short, the baby did not exist physically. Being the child of the best Black Guards of the human world and the demonic, even though still unborn, the baby must hold amazing power. Great forces were at work. Was the baby capable of controlling that power? Therein lay an unanswerable question.

"Don't even think about leaving. You're not going anywhere until you give birth, okay? I'll get you everything you need."

With that, Taki went out the door.

When he was gone, Makie again placed her hand over the lower part of her left cheek, over a tiny black spot.

4

TAKI STOPPED at the top of the stairs. He took a cigarette from his pocket and put it into his mouth. It sizzled as he got the lighter closer to it, a pure blue fire that was gone as soon as he inhaled.

"I should calm down," Taki muttered. He peered downstairs. Lee stood in the center of the huge open space, still as a statue.

No, he was moving. Taki watched carefully as Lee turned ever so slowly on the ball of his left foot. His right leg was raised high and pulled into his chest, and his arms were spread out like the wings of an angel. His body was moving up and down as it rotated, but the motion was barely detectable. The sleeves of his jacket, normal in length, looked like the feathers of a demonic bird as he flapped his arms.

Taki leaped from the stairs to the floor, six meters below, then jumped back so he would not crash into the wall. "It's not over between you and me," Taki said jokingly.

Lee finally stood still. "Anything about the Shus?"

"I don't know. They will find us sooner or later. Hope she enters labor before that," Taki said. "Remem-

ber what the Boss said? Even the Shu family cannot touch Makie's baby."

"I see. It's about whether it's from outside or inside," Lee nodded. He still stood only on the ball of his left foot. He was a master of Chinese kung fu, with incredibly strong legs.

Taki was impressed, but he would never tell Lee so. "I'll check outside. You take care of her."

Lee gave a solemn nod. Taki went outside and closed the door behind him. As soon as the door clanked shut, he felt chills down his spine. His hair stood on end. He spat out the cigarette, his face white as a sheet. *No way—they've found us? How is that possible?*

There was no time to go and identify the source of the surprise arrival. The enemy was there. He could feel it with every fiber of his body. Taki looked harder, using his Psy Power to protect himself from the vibe that was so nasty it would easily make a normal human die of age.

His vision blurred and warped, but he could still hear the dark ocean beyond the concrete path.

A white light appeared in the middle of the road. Just a small dot of light, like the flash from a lighted match. The light wavered and began to take shape. Something hovered around the flame, something with a strange texture. Was the fire solid or vaporous? It

was hard to tell. All Taki knew was that the vibes radiated from it.

Taki was about to pull out his gun and fire into the flame when he realized he should not move his arms. He had to remain cautious. Anything, any movement, could set it off. This enemy was unknown. It was better to keep a distance. Calling Lee was out of the question, too.

Taki let his Psychic Power flow into his right hand. The enemy's energy quivered for a moment. It must have noticed Taki's presence.

He braced for an attack, but it never came. Taki breathed out slowly, and fire flew from his mouth. It was a ball of Psy Power. He blew it toward the enemy. Inside the waves of his extrasensory power, Taki saw his Psy Power being sucked toward the flame like a soap bubble on a breeze, leaving a trail. When it reached the light, it popped and disappeared.

The flame wavered. A shower of horrid energy ripped through the dark, still air.

Taki stood his ground, but the energy did not touch him. Blue sparks appeared around his body, inches from his skin—his Psy Power had formed a shield that crashed and blocked the attacker's energy.

Apparently he had caught the invader off guard, because it slithered back timidly.

Taki felt the attacker's attention slip, and that was

when he launched his attack. He dove into it like a tiger and grabbed the flame with both hands. A wave of shock pierced through his body from head to toe. It felt cold and hot at the same time. It lasted three long seconds. He poured Psy Power into it. The energy vibrated down his arms and back up again. When the enemy's power and his Psy Power collided, a sudden feeling of exhaustion washed over him, as if the enemy were draining Taki's energy. He started to panic—Psy Power loss could be a fatal mistake. He backed off.

The flame darkened. Something buzzed away from his grasp. The enemy had escaped.

The next thing Taki felt was the coldness of the concrete against his cheek. He didn't remember landing on the pavement, only the numbness of his skin. He opened his eyes.

He turned right. Nothing. Left—a flash of light was visible in the distance. It was very low and flickering. The attacker was in bad shape, too.

Now was his chance to kill it once and for all. Taki tried to stand, but his knees buckled and he slumped to the ground. He mustered his Psy Power to help lift himself up. At least he could move. With his M29 .44 Magnum in hand, Taki aimed and fired, letting his Psy Power churn through his body. Every step forward sent a shooting pain through his body that shook

his brain. Flecks of the enemy's pale flame still hovered around.

The fierce battle outside was not lost on Lee. The building had a special coating that let in energies from outside but did not let anything out. Lee knew what was going on but did not attempt to help Taki. Lee's cool gaze did not even flinch at his colleague's outcry. In the corner of the bleak warehouse, Lee moved with his calm elegance, sometimes a gentle round curve, sometimes a crescent moon. He was not unsympathetic, only keeping his word to keep Makie safe. His primary job was to protect the building from invaders.

His pale pink lips finally moved when he sensed the two energies shift. "Taki . . . you hot-headed . . . Now it's just me and Makie."

There was good reason for his alarm. As soon as Taki ran to chase the invader, another vibe encompassed the storehouse. His lips formed a gentle smile, undaunted at the incredible amount of energy the enemy radiated.

The cuffs of his jacket quivered faintly. There was a wind. The windows were sealed, the doors locked airtight. Every possible way in had been shut, and Lee's movements were too subtle to make his clothes flutter.

Wind.

"What are you waiting for?" Lee asked the breeze. "If you don't come in, I can't touch you. You cannot touch me either. There's no PP getting in the way." While there was a barrier to keep Psy Power from being detected inside, there was nothing to keep it out, because that would have been too obvious to the pursuers. Lack of a security system to make the place invisible. That was the idea, but it had backfired.

He heard a dull thud. A faint creaking sound rose up from the corner of the room. The warehouse door was sliding up. The gap between the door and the floor slowly widened.

Street lamps pierced the dark in front of the warehouse. Nothing else. Just an empty street in the grim darkness.

But Lee felt its presence. He heard its footfalls. Slowly it circled around Lee and stopped. The door quietly rolled down until it was closed.

Lee did not move.

THE SHUS

PART FOUR

1

THE INVADER did not strike immediately. It was sizing up Lee's capability, thinking what his move was going to be. Lee felt its tendrils of probing energy, like tingling all over his body. It was almost flirtatious.

"You're not from the Shu family, are you?" Lee said.

Air circulated around him slowly. It was a powerful energy, but Lee had confronted stronger in his day. This was a third lieutenant at best, and a freshly promoted one at that.

Perhaps this was a wannabe they had sent out as a

scout. Something bigger was behind it, something pulling all the strings on whatever this was.

The pricking stopped. "Satisfied?" Lee asked calmly.

As if in reply, the energy lunged toward him. Lee lifted his arms. His sleeves flapped like the huge black wings of a magical bird. The wind he generated was much more powerful than it should have been solely from the motion of two flapping arms.

Air surged up and circulated around the room. The evil spirit was instantly blown away in the wind, torn up and scattered. Lee stopped moving. His intelligent eyes scanned the ceiling of the warehouse.

"I know you're not gone, so why don't you show yourself?" Lee said. He could see no one. There was nothing in the room, not that he could see. He couldn't feel the Shu family's presence the way Wickerman could, the demon with the Shu genes.

"You're not going to show up. Then I'll start," Lee muttered and raised his arms, forming a shape like a crane's jaw. From somewhere came the tinkling crash of glass, the sound of a window shattering. There was no need to look around. He knew where the sound came from.

Makie's room.

Lee sped up the stairs, ignoring the would-be

invader. He kicked the door down and jumped in, graceful as a deer. He did not have to check every murky corner of the room. It was empty.

Makie must have jumped out the window. The window was three meters from the ground, and she was pregnant. There was no sign of her.

Lee looked out of the window at Taki staring up at him. Both wore the same look of shock, and Lee knew Taki felt the same as he did—neither had seen this coming.

They walked among the throngs of people in Shinagawa. Well, probably not *quite* walked. They had a purpose, one so strong they could do nothing else until it was completed. They were being pulled by a subtle signal, a teeny-weeny radio wave, thinner than a strand of silk. A few hours before, in this world's time, they had discovered that the signal had fooled them. Seething with anger, they hit the road in search of the signal's source.

The group originally had six members but was now down to four. Two were gone. Not died, exactly, more like destroyed. One of their number had transformed into the enemy's boss and snuck into their meeting. Another had blitzed the enemy while wearing the body

of a human who had been born to become his vessel twenty-two years ago. Another of the enemy had risen from the dead and killed it.

Within twelve hours of being awakened from the seven-thousand-year slumber, two of the six members of the Shu family had been defeated.

They were furious. The only good news was that one of them had successfully reduced three of their enemies to infants, though it had come back injured. That night, they were shocked to find the signal flickering through the city. It was extremely weak, barely recognizable, but it did not elude them, and they followed it willingly.

They now knew it was a decoy. The four that remained, each coming from a different direction, trooped toward the Ooi Pier. When they arrived, they found a warehouse. The target was hidden inside. They successfully shorted out the Psy Power of one of the guards, but another, incredibly powerful guard stood in their way. Before they knew it, the target got away.

That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. The signal left its traces throughout the city. They followed the scant trail, but it was a struggle. One of them had been injured in the most recent attack. Wherever it went, poisonous air followed. It looked like a small, spotty light as it moved along the street, unnoticed by this world's inhabitants because it was too faint to be recognized, a

flickering candle in the wind. The wavering light was half rotten. It needed to recover and to do so quickly. It would have to body-jump to get a new skin. The others would continue to track the signal.

It waited for a new skin in a back alley just outside Shinagawa Station, near a busy street corner packed with cafés and restaurants. It didn't take long for his prey to arrive. Two people turning the corner headed straight for it.

It did not mind there were two. It quickly sped toward them. Resistance was fruitless. The people had no idea what had hit them. It made its choice, turning the female human's internal organs into a gas so that only the skin remained. The body was a comfortable fit, and it was pleased. It added a special coating to the thin, weak skin and tuned itself to the body.

And then it was ready for more fresh meat. The woman's companion's eyes were wide, frightened beyond words. He opened his mouth to scream, and something that looked like an insect flew inside. The next instant, flames burst out of his mouth, ears, and nostrils. She turned to him, smiling, as if nothing had happened.

He turned to run. It approached him. It grabbed onto his shoulders, pulling him back, and with its white hands twisted his head around and pressed its mouth onto his lips. He turned into a ball of fire, burn-

ing completely away. There was no trace left. Happy with its new skin, it walked away without a word. It emerged from the alley and stepped into the moonlight wearing the body of a young woman in a pink blouse and tight gray skirt, a purse strap tangled around her hand. She had not lost the trail.

2

LEE USED his video transmission device to inform the Hospital that Makie had gone missing. Within thirty minutes, there was another meeting at the Hospital to discuss their next move. The Hospital staff reported their decision to Lee and Taki. They were going to send them a detecting device that could track Makie's unearthly aura.

"No. We haven't got time," Taki said, frustrated. "The enemy could be onto her already. I can't afford to wait around for a detector to arrive. Everything depends on the next ten minutes."

"Can't Taki track Makie?" Lee asked the Boss. "Don't they have some kind of psychic bond?"

The voice replied, "They do, but now that Makie's having a baby, he might not be able to sense her. Her psychic wavelength has changed."

"Then what do we do?" Lee asked, confused.

"Make me a detector," Taki said.

"What?!" A look of horror swept over Lee's handsome face.

"Fuse my ultra senses with Makie's aura. We can do it right now, right here."

The Boss shook his head. "That's too risky. It's a no. Implanting a new ability into your body will put you in a state of physical discomfort, which may decrease your usual abilities."

"There's no other way. We need time. The future of the two worlds depends on the next thirty minutes. Why waste time waiting for permission?"

"Look, Taki," a new voice said.

"Director!" Taki and Lee said together.

The Director put up a hand, cutting them off. "Let's cut the formalities. I'm fine, thank you. I'm overriding the Hospital and approving this crazy plan. Take ten steps south-southwest from where you're standing. I'll work out a remote surgery."

Taki nodded, a grim expression on his face. He took his ten paces and waited. He tried to relax. Suddenly his whole body tensed, and a stabbing pain shot through him, burning every nerve ending. The pain receded and then started up again like a wave, over and over. Finally the pain weakened and stayed away, and Taki took a deep breath.

"It's over," said the Director's voice from the transmitter.

Remote surgery. The operation itself had been performed in the Hospital in Azabu, but the result materialized in Taki's body while he stood in the warehouse on Ooi Pier. The procedure was a mixture of psychic operation and teleport, but instead of moving an object from Point A to Point B, it was the operation that was transferred. Doctors conducted the surgery on an invisible patient, and Taki's body received the operation.

Taki, exhausted, slumped over. Lee reached out and steadied his colleague. "You've gone through enough. Take a rest."

Taki's breaths came out in short bursts. "I . . . can't."

"But the anesthetic hasn't worn off."

"I . . . wasn't . . . given any."

"What!"

"I . . . need to be . . . sharp."

Lee had no answer for that; he knew Taki was right. "How are you feeling?"

Taki shook his head and pressed his fingers onto his eyelids. He opened his eyes. "I can see it. I can see Makie's aura."

. . .

"So what do they look like?" Don Sharp asked. He sounded tired.

"You won't find them until they attack. You can't even put up a barrier against them, because you can't tell who they are." Mike laughed. "When this is over, you're buying me a beach house in Cannes."

The brothers were walking through the busiest amusement district in Shinagawa City. Lights flashed relentlessly in this neon-drenched enclave, home to sex shops, hostess bars, peeping rooms, pleasure houses. You name it, it was here. The city had something for everyone.

The Sharps were out searching for the Shus when they got the news from Taki about Makie being missing. They were told to keep an eye out for Makie as they continued their investigation of the Shinagawa area.

That was a little while before Taki's surgery. Without Taki's new advantage, Makie's aura eluded even the ultra senses of the mighty brothers. Eyes and ears were all they had. That meant the two of them had been looking and asking about a "nice-looking woman" for the past thirty minutes.

"Nah. We're getting nowhere. Makie may be stunning, but this is a big city. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. She's a tree in a forest," Mike said grouchily.

Don had his own ideas about how to find their quarry. "Then we bulldoze over every tree that stands

in our way. That way you'll find the one." That was the mentality of a man who grew up with daily intake of a salt-and-pepper steak and watery American coffee.

Mike looked incredulous. "But, bro—"

"No buts. Let's split up."

Mike gave a resigned sigh. "Fine." He turned and walked in the opposite direction, leaving his brother behind. A stout man bumped into his shoulder, walked a few steps, then stopped and turned around.

"Wait up, foreigner," the heavily built man called.

Mike whipped around to face him. "Huh? What is it?"

Standing an inch over six feet tall and weighing 203 pounds, the man, who sported a crew cut, was huge. Even so, he was slightly smaller than Don and Mike, but he made up for it with a piercing gaze that he had been using effectively to scare people all his life. The barrel chest under his business suit gave him an imposing look that would send regular thugs scampering away.

Three more big men stood around him. *What is this?* Mike wondered. *A street gang?*

"What do you want?" Mike asked again.

"You bumped me. That's what," the suit said.

"Ah," Mike exclaimed, placing his hand over his mouth. "I am so sorry. I obviously owe you an apology."

The man in the suit smiled. "That's good. Get down on your knees and beg for forgiveness."

"On my knees?"

"That's right. You bumped me. That's the least you could do."

"On my knees?"

Don returned to his brother's side, looking like the backup he was. The three men with the suit surrounded the brothers.

"You have a thing against foreigners or what?" Mike inquired.

The suit shrugged. "Not particularly. Just want you to know not all Japanese are soft."

"So, what? This is a random attack?" Mike asked.

"That's right."

"Then we're not going to go easy on you. Right, bro?"

"Nope," Don replied. "Not easy."

Even living a violence-filled life, the gang members could not help but flinch at the glaring eyes that stared back at them. The Sharp brothers each stood nearly six and a half feet tall. Their muscles were visible even under their clothing. For a second, the gang paused, perhaps to think about how to divert the brothers' attention.

That was all the time Don and Mike needed. Despite Don's bulk, he glided toward one of the thugs and lifted his elbow, his footwork light as a feather. There was the sound of bodies colliding, and the

two-hundred-pound thug was sent flying. He hit the wall of the railway bridge and fell headfirst to the pavement. It was a quick and painful blow. The rest of the gang fell silent.

It was Mike's turn. With one move, he pushed his palm into the suit's face. The suit moved too slowly to do anything about it as his nose cracked. Another thug came at him, and Mike's hand sank into his chest. Passersby gawked at the two foreigners, tossing the thugs as if they were rag dolls.

"Watch it!" Mike yelled. Behind the huge man he had just thrown into the air, he had spotted a short, slender man stepping into the way from the side street, unaware of what was going on. The big man in the suit landed right on top of him with a crunch, and both lay there, limp.

Mike stared. A young woman with a slight build appeared on the sidewalk. She bounced off one of the thugs. She was a long-haired girl in a pink blouse. Mike felt his brother tense up behind him as he swatted the two other men down to the ground.

The brothers watched in amazement as the woman used her slender, pale hands to grab the shoulders of the two thugs as they struggled to get up. She raised her arms, and the thugs' legs were lifted off the ground. There was a groan from the thugs, and then their large bodies flew through the air, tossed by the woman who

was barely half their size. She followed, a new flame burning in her eyes. She grabbed them by their hair, and a dull, nauseating sound echoed through the air, the sound of two heads cracking together. The thugs' skulls shattered, and warm liquid ran over the woman's hands. Something shiny flew from the mess and dropped on the road, just inches from Mike and Don. It was an eyeball.

Don made a retching sound.

"Get down!" Mike cried. He reached inside his jacket and pulled out his gun. The Colt looked small in his big hand. The woman lifted the two corpses as if they weighed no more than her purse and flung them at the brothers. The .45 auto spat flame as Mike fired, jumping aside.

The young woman's stomach exploded as the force of Mike's Psy-Power-loaded bullet penetrated her body. A pale fire erupted from her belly. The flames spread around her, licking the window of a nearby Chinese restaurant.

The woman got up and faced the Sharp brothers. Her face looked like that of a normal human being. But the hate burning in her eyes was a product of Hell. She opened her mouth, and more pale fire spewed out. It was different than what Mike's bullet had produced—it was demonic.

The woman threw back her head, ready to cook

Mike and Don with her flamethrower mouth. Someone nearby screamed, and she ran off, knocking down a few passersby and rammed into the roll-up security door of a building. She left a person-shaped dent in the metal and kept running.

Mike groaned from the ground, where he had fallen after jumping to avoid the flying corpse. He held his head where it had hit the pavement.

"You catch up with me later!" Don shouted to Mike and took off. Don's face wore an expression of pure joy. He was born to fight. He knew the young woman was part of the Shu family, and he was ready for her.

3

DON WATCHED the woman, white fire pouring from her body, snake her way through the crowd in front of him. She was seven meters ahead of him, and he could not seem to catch up. She had great speed. The woman's muscles had been enhanced by the Shus' power.

She turned into a deserted alley, and Don followed. The alley was bordered by two- and three-story buildings both sides. Multi-tenant buildings, Don guessed.

You screwed up, Shu. Don was laughing inwardly as

he sped after her. She thought she had the perfect cover, but it had been blown so easily. Don would not have suspected her at all if she had not joined the fight. He knew why she had done it. Mike had released a good dose of Psy Power as he beat up on the thugs. The beast inside the woman's skin lost control when she touched their Psy-Power-soaked bodies, like a carnivorous animal responding to the scent of blood.

Things looked pretty bad for the enemy. She had taken a hit when Mike shot her. She had left without trying to fight the brothers. She might be quick on her feet, but it was only a matter of time before the Psy Power in Mike's bullet started to take its toll. The woman, still spouting fire, turned the corner. Two seconds later, Don followed. A group of men stood five meters ahead. They were so large they would have dwarfed the thugs. All of them turned their heads to look at Don and the woman running toward them. Some stood Don's height, some half a head taller. They all had fit, pumped-up bodies like Don. There was only one occupation possible for a group like that. The round-neck T-shirts they wore featured a hawk mark and a large logo that read IP WRESTLERS. International Power Wrestlers, or IPW.

Don knew that name. It was a new team, based in Shinagawa. Perhaps they were out for a quick smoke after the day's practice. They spun around and

watched in confusion as the fire-spitting woman buzzed by.

Another huge man appeared from the corner to their left. Stunned, he did a double take when the woman passed him. The giant man stood a good six and a half feet tall, with a face like a rolled-up leaf and two piercing eyes. He was the captain of the IPW, and his name was Bucks Hiya. Twenty-eight years old and only eight inches shorter than André the Giant, he packed quite a wallop. Rumor had it that he had knocked André down in fifteen seconds. When it came to combat sports, he was second to none in Japan, if not in the whole world. He fought with a stunning speed and power.

Hiya stood in the alley, confused.

"Excuse me," Don said as he ran past him and turned off into a side street. He ran a few more steps and then skidded to a stop, his face screwed up in disappointment. He was greeted by deserted alleys on both sides.

The woman was gone. He had lost her.

Bucks Hiya walked toward his teammates, his gaze still glued to the place where the bulky foreigner had turned.

"What was that?" said another of the wrestlers. He, like Hiya, had an imposing physique. His name was

Ota Gendo, and he was the co-captain of the IPW. He was also known as Maxim. As the name suggested, he moved from body slam to hammerlock to groundwork with an amazing speed and sharpness that reminded you of a Maxim gun.

"Man, did you see that?" Gendo said. "She was shooting out fire from her mouth. And that foreign guy chasing her? He was practically flying."

"Yeah, I know." Hiya nodded. "He was huge. How did he move so fast? Hey, Kosugi, you go find him and bring him back. We'll have a drink together. He could be the next All-Japan Wrestling Champion, like John Tenta."

The young man called Kosugi, whose physique was as massive as Hiya's, bowed and took off, knowing that the captain never took no for an answer. The rest of the group started to walk toward the end of the alley. Off to another bar. As they turned the corner, they saw another foreigner coming in their direction. The man bore a striking resemblance to Don. This one was wobbly on his feet, like a drunkard. He grabbed onto one of the young team trainees.

"D-did you see a suspicious-looking woman and a foreigner that looks like me?" he asked.

"He took off in that direction," the young man replied, pointing back to the alley.

"Thanks."

"Wait," a low voice called. "My name is Hiya. I am with the IPW. Any chance you would want to work with us? I could have you ready for the World Championships in three months."

Mike looked over his shoulder as he ran on. "Thanks. I'll consider it when I quit my current job. 'Bye."

"What a waste," Hiya and Gendo muttered together.

One of the trainees stepped forward. "The other one may not take Kosugi seriously. I'll go, Captain, and see if I can't convince them."

"Wait. I'll go," Hiya said, causing the trainees to gasp in awe. He was already running.

Gendo, after seeing Hiya turning the corner at a breakneck speed, commented, "Damn, he's gotten even faster."

"Hey, you. She's not over here."

Mike twirled around, annoyed. He recognized the voice and rolled his eyes. *These guys don't give up, do they?* "Sorry, got to rush."

"I know. I just wanted to tell you they didn't go that way. They went down that alley over there," Hiya said, pointing to a side street a few meters away.

"Thanks a bunch," Mike said gratefully. He started

running in the suggested direction without question. The man looked sincere enough. Who was he to doubt him? Besides, Mike's head hurt too much to argue. Feeling a little woozy, he shuffled into the darkened alley.

4

JUST AS Mike walked into the alley, Don stumbled out, looking aggravated. "Damn. Where did she go?" He looked around and then took off in another direction. He ran toward the corner and stopped when he heard a groan.

Don stopped and shifted his gaze toward the sound. Two stray dogs were snarling, heads hidden behind a nearby power pole. Don raced for it. He kicked the snarling dogs aside and peered at what they had been attacking. Don's eyes widened, but not out of shock. The pile of flesh lying on the sidewalk like a piece of trash was nothing compared to the things he had seen in the past. No, he was gripped by fear, understanding that he had screwed up and because of it his brother was in danger. Lying on top of the flesh, which had been discarded like an old coat, were some strands of black hair and a pink blouse.

"Mike, watch out for the wrestler."

. . .

The alley Mike was in opened up into a small square about ten meters on a side. Buildings stood on both sides. It hit him the moment he got near—something evil. Every molecule of the earth was emitting demonic rays. That was why the square was empty. Mike knew what it was; many of these could be found in the country, some in cities.

The Black Guard called it "decayed land." These were cursed pieces of land that were supposed to remain barren. The dim square where Mike stood was one of those cursed sites.

Three houses had once stood on this bare patch of land. Two of the three families that had lived there had died, and the third had a terrible life. The first house was burned down by an accidental fire. The second house was completely destroyed by a flood. The people who lived in the houses were trapped inside and could not get away. Horrible ways to die.

The third house, however, was worse. Its residents suffered from mental degeneration. The first sign that anything was amiss showed in the first-born son, Wesley, then fourteen years old. He was a straight-A student who helped support the family

with a paper route. One day he suddenly changed. He started missing both school and work. Eventually he quit school and was seen wandering around the streets, mumbling to himself. He performed his first theft a day before his fifteenth birthday. The family had been living in the cursed home for six months and twenty-one days, moving there from Norfolk, Virginia.

Wesley committed various kinds of petty thefts for two years, his mental stability deteriorating until his mother, also deemed mentally ill, beat him to death.

His mother, Beth, then thirty-eight, had been known as a dedicated and loving mother until she started to display bizarre behavior, right around the same time as her son. She abandoned her duties at home and instead spent most of her day at bars, drinking. She never paid her debts and was shunned by her neighbors. She seduced a number of young men, inviting them to her home for kinky sex. Later it was discovered she had abused her nine-year-old son with a red-hot poker and smashed her husband's skull with it as he stepped in to stop her. The family had hit bottom, and it was because of them that this piece of property became known as the most deadly and potent decayed land to be seen in the last fifty years.

Mike stood at the edge, staring. Not a tree grew on the land, and even the soil reeked. The air, the soil—everything was rotten there. Legend had it that this was one of the places where humans and demons had fought in ancient times. The truth remained obscure.

Mike could not resist. He stepped in, focusing every bit of his Psy Power into the Colt in his right hand. Immediately he was covered in his own sweat. Doubt entered his mind—could this be a trap? A come-on gesture, like Don had given to the enemy in Hibiya Park that morning?

Before he could consider anything else, a wave of energy slapped him from behind. It boiled inside his body, burning every cell. Normally he would be able to protect himself with his Psy Power, but he had put too much of it into the gun. He slowly turned around to find a huge figure standing at the edge of the decayed land.

"Son of a bitch . . ." Mike lifted his gun. His fingernails flashed blue; there was so much Psy Power inside the weapon, it glowed.

"You sure you're not interested?" Bucks Hiya asked again.

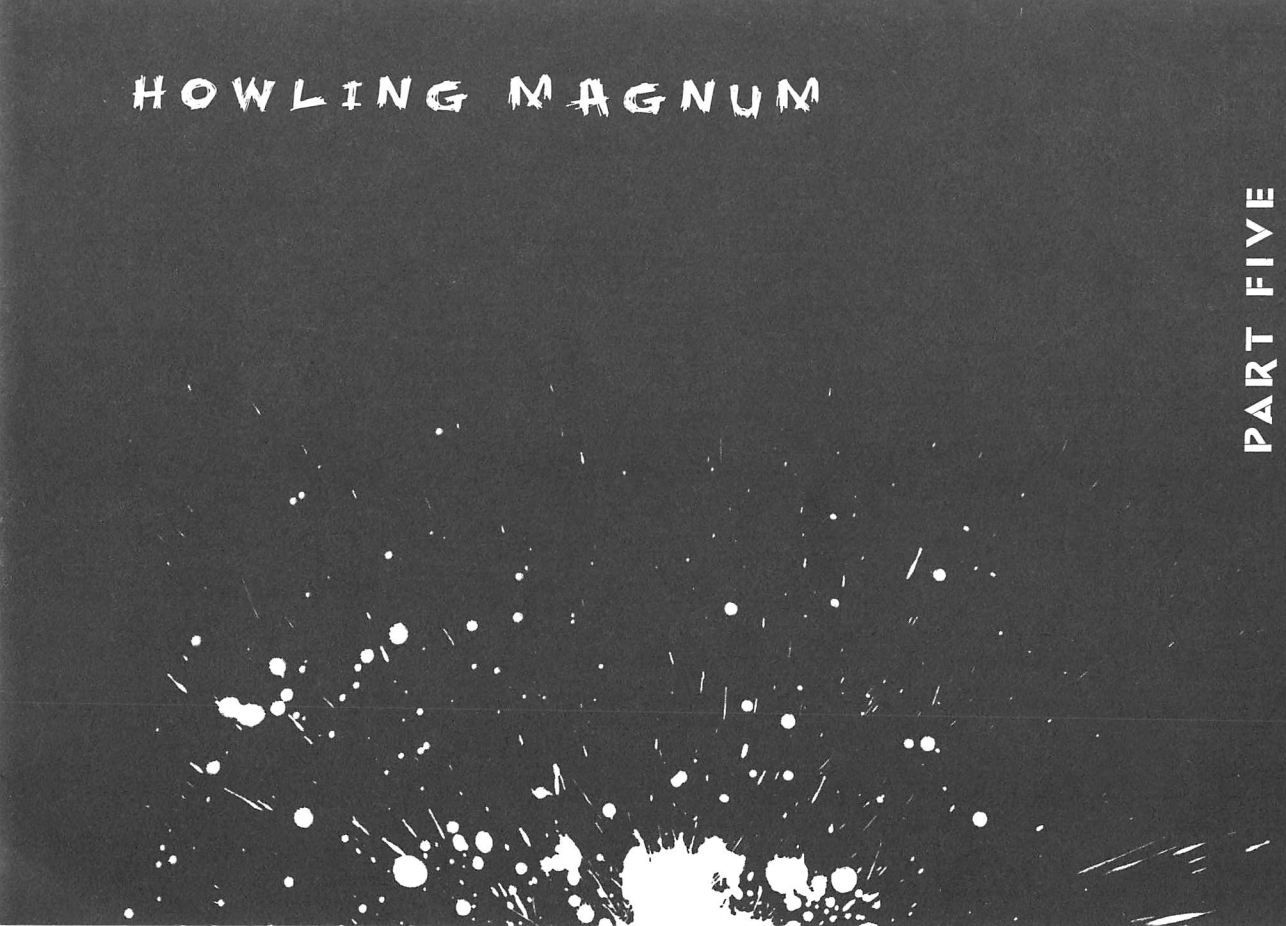
Mike pulled the trigger. The gun shuddered, and the curse of the land struck again. The ball of Psy Power exploded in his fist. Mike's body was blasted backward, and he was killed instantly.

"Let's not waste your death," said Hiya. Of course, he was not Hiya the wrestler. When the real Hiya had run down the alley, he passed the woman in the pink blouse. The being inside had burned everything in his body so that only his skin would be left.

He walked toward Mike's dead body. "I'm going to wear your skin."

HOWLING MAGNUM

PART FIVE



1

MAKIE WAS in Hamamatsucho, making her way to the station, her otherworldly beauty intact and unspoiled. The eyes had an empty look, but there was a heart-stopping glint of something. There was a new spark in her face, something that nobody had ever seen. How had she escaped the warehouse? The power of the baby sleeping inside her, perhaps?

She arrived at the station, but the door was closed. It was after one in the morning. Makie walked past it and stood in front of the station building. It was also closed tight.

She stood there for a few seconds, concentrating on the door. There was a click as the door unlocked. It rattled as it rolled up, unaided by anyone. The lights flickered on as Makie walked in. She made her way through the deserted building and walked toward the escalator, which whirled to life when Makie stood in front of it. It was as if she had brought the building to life in the dead of night.

As she reached the second floor, thumping footfalls approached. "Wait! What are you doing here?" Two security officers in gray uniforms swooped in, blocking her path.

Makie ignored the clichéd inquiry. Both guards carried a special baton. Their expressions softened when they realized Makie was a woman.

"Who are you?" asked one.

"How did you get in?" said the other.

Makie kept going, barely acknowledging them.

"Hey!" One of them touched her shoulder. There was a snapping sound, as if someone had crushed a leather bag filled with water. Makie didn't move, but the officer was knocked away as if he had been hit by a car. He hit the wall and slumped to the ground.

The other officer was furious. "You—you've assaulted an officer!"

He came at her, his baton raised high. He wasn't

going full speed and didn't plan on hurting Makie, since she was a woman. But the result would have been the same even if he had. His baton was knocked away, along with his body, and both rammed into the concrete wall beside his partner.

She did not leave any permanent marks on either of them. Without a word, she went up the stairs to the monorail platform. Lights flickered on as she passed them.

The last train to Haneda Airport left at 11:15 P.M. A six-car train was parked on the rails, dark and empty. The train came to life as Makie approached. She had just stepped up to the door, ready to enter, when a cracking sound broke the silent air. The whole building shook. A break appeared in the train door, as if it had been cut by an invisible blade.

Makie slowly turned to her left. Not a soul. At least, nothing human. *Something* was there, however. It looked like it was wrapped in a half-transparent skin and was taking shape in the space between Makie and the stairs.

"Glad I was in time," the thing's voice said inside Makie's head. *"Are you wondering how I found you? Wherever you go I'm there. You're going to die. I'm going to make it quick, though, so be grateful."*

Makie wondered if this Shu was the snake handler

who had nearly slain Wickerman. Without turning around, ignoring the demon, Makie walked through the door.

The monster swung around, realizing that Makie's calmness was not a bluff. The sound of footsteps echoed up the stairs; someone else was coming.

Wickerman emerged from the stairwell and stepped onto the platform. Against his size, the compact Ingram MAC-11 in his hand seemed like a toy. The attacker was not to be fooled, however. He realized this Black Guard was tougher than he looked; he had come back from the dead after being bitten by the demon's poisonous snake.

The door closed behind him with a hiss. A hot sensation burned the monster's face as a bullet from Wickerman's MAC-11 tore into it. The bullet alone was powerful, made deadlier when loaded with Wickerman's Psychic Power. It drilled through the demon's cells, both burning and freezing them to death.

The monster had enough energy and presence of mind to fight back. He generated a wave of energy equal to five of Wickerman's bullets. The wave headed straight for the Black Guard. With a stunning speed, Wickerman leaped into the air. The wave swept under his feet and hit the wall behind him. It cracked, a clean cut, as if the thirty-centimeter-thick wall had been hit with a laser beam.

While still in the air, Wickerman kept firing. The gun, which could spit out twelve hundred rounds per minute, shook the evil creature with a hail of bullets. From the corner of his eye, Wickerman saw the monorail start to pull away.

"Not good," he muttered. He reached his hand in the direction of the train. A black snake-like creature wrapped itself around his wrist. It raised its flat face and came at Wickerman. His other hand grabbed it and tore it in half. He only let down his guard for a second when he flung it off.

Wickerman rushed forward, chasing the monorail. The next instant, his right hand exploded, blood splattering everywhere. The Ingram hit the floor with a thud. Wickerman turned around, perfectly calm despite the catastrophic injury. The only thing he could see was a black shadow burned into the wall. Although oddly slender, it could pass as the shadow of a human being. But there was no person to go with it. It had no substance. No flesh. A mere shadow. The being was flat. Wickerman briefly wondered what kind of energy made it possible for an entity like this to be born.

"The Shu family?" asked Wickerman.

"That is correct," the voice rang out in his head. *"I am Satori, a member of the Shus. I am a little late to enter this game. Hope to catch up soon."*

"Interesting. But how?"

"This is how."

Something cut through the air with a swish, like a sword, although nothing was visible. Wickerman's left arm was torn off at its root. His pale face turned sickly as more blood poured from his body. The energy whizzed through the air like a blade.

Wickerman was barely able to concentrate. It was just a two-dimensional shadow, wasn't it? But this demon was more. It was thinner than a shadow, and had the hardness of titanium steel and the sharpness of a Japanese sword. Satori could cut through anything—concrete and steel were no more difficult than bread to him. There was no escaping from Satori's blade.

The shadow's arm extended. Five fingers appeared at the end. The shadow grasped Wickerman's arms, wrapping around them like a black sheet. He squeezed briefly and released Wickerman. Something white appeared in the shadow, near the area where a mouth should be. It dropped to the floor, bounding like a wooden stick on the concrete.

It was an upper arm bone. More followed quickly; finger bones, wrist bones, and the thinner bones of the lower arm.

"I like the taste of your flesh. Human meat. The rest of the family shunned me, saying I had no pride. I can't eat

them, unfortunately. But I'm not going to wait while the rest claim all the glory, or the spoils. I've eaten two men so far. I don't care what they say. I'm going to eat you now."

Wickerman's breath came in short gasps. "Satori, the cannibal demon. I've heard about you . . . Are you sure you like my meat?"

Satori chuckled. *"Don't worry. Men, women, as long as it's not my family, everything tastes delicious."*

Satori stopped when he saw Wickerman smile. *"What are you so happy about? I'm about to kill you and eat you."* He tried to unleash more energy at Wickerman, but a violent, stabbing pain shot through his body.

"What did you say? You can't eat your family?" Satori heard Wickerman say as an unworldly nausea gripped him.

Satori's shadow body doubled over in pain. *"This nausea . . . I just broke a taboo? You?"*

"One of you raped my mother. She gave birth to me seven thousand years ago," Wickerman explained matter-of-factly. "You could be my father for all I know. Son kills father. Father eats son. This is going to be interesting."

His voice resonated across the platform. Wickerman raced for the wriggling shadow on the wall, a trail of blood spluttering behind him. He plunged headfirst

into the demon. A blue flare wavered as the two came together. It was a sad, fleeting flame, and gone quickly. Satori's shadow never moved, fixed on the wall of the platform. Now there was another shadow beside it, one without arms. Wickerman's Psy Power and Satori's energy had collided, burning their shadows onto the wall.

But even after passing into shadows, the duel continued. In fact, the shadows were not still but kept changing shape little by little. The movement was too subtle to be observed by humans. It would take another thousand years to finish the battle.

The monorail's light was long gone.

2

A STRIP OF dark light hovered within Taki's vision. It was Makie's aura. Only he could see it, and he saw nothing else. A detector designed specifically for Makie's aura had been surgically implanted into his vision. He had seen her aura many times, but that was before she got pregnant. It still possessed the same deep darkness, but now it glowed much more than it had before. Taki knew it was the baby. Their child was shining—a dazzling kind of

dark. He had no idea what the child could do. All he could do was be proud of its profundity.

At the moment he was scared. There was no doubt that the baby had something to do with Makie's disappearance. Pregnancy can make some women vulnerable to depression. Her recent glum mood wasn't that unusual. God knew what she would do next. What if Makie unwittingly unleashed her power? That was a frightening idea, especially since her power could be amplified by the baby. The thought gave Taki chills.

He couldn't hunt for her by car. Makie had the ability to maneuver a vehicle in an alley or a side street, however narrow. Taki would not be able to chase her once she got behind the wheel. So he walked along the street near Shinagawa Station, brooding.

A black baton was thrust in his face as he moved past a dark and empty restaurant. Taki jumped back to dodge it. He moved with such ease that he looked like he was riding on the wind. It was his training.

"Oops. Excuse me," the man who held the baton said. He didn't bother to bring down his arm. Several other men, sitting on a couple of nearby benches, turned around to watch them. They were so large that the seats they occupied, which normally accommodated four men each, only held two, and their buttocks hung over the ends.

Taki ignored them and kept moving.

"Wait," a cheerful voice said.

"Give us a minute, buddy," said the man who had stuck out his arm.

Taki did not stop. Dark shadows emerged from the nearby food stall and blocked him. They moved with great agility considering the fact that they were all over six feet tall.

They all wore gray sweatshirts. From the way they moved, so smoothly and with purpose, Taki figured someone had given them specific orders to stop him.

Taki turned toward the men. "What can I do for you?" His voice was edged with irritation.

"Give us a minute," another voice said. He came out to greet Taki— it was Bucks Hiya.

He smiled his masculine smile, exposing his pearly white teeth.

Taki gave a bitter smile. "Sorry. But not tonight. Things to do."

"Don't be like that, Taki." Hiya's smiling face darkened. "Just trying to help out a friend."

The fact that Taki was a great fan of wrestling, particularly of Bucks Hiya, was a secret among the Black Guard. Years ago, through connections, a meeting had been arranged between Taki and Hiya. They had instantly hit it off and had been friends ever since.

"You're always busy, man. You still work for an electronics place, right?"

Taki nodded. "That's right."

He smiled and turned.

Hiya stopped him again. "Hey. Do you happen to be looking for some weird chick?"

"How did you know?" Taki asked.

"And a funny foreigner?" Hiya gave a thumbs-up.

Taki raised an eyebrow. "You see them around here?"

"Yeah. He ran off in that direction." Hiya hitched his thumb over his shoulder. "He looked panicky. The woman walked in the same direction, a little before the guy. She was stunning."

Taki looked around. Makie's aura was turning the corner, darkness trailing.

"Thanks. The foreigner is a client from America. He snuck out of the hotel, chasing his female assistant. I have to get him back to the hotel. I'll see you at a venue sometime."

"That's not good." Hiya leaned forward. "He was too big. You'll need help. Let me accompany you."

Taki waved his hands at Hiya. "Thanks, but it's not necessary."

"Don't be like that. I'm more famous in America than in Japan. Let me grease things up for you." That much was true. Bucks Hiya had made his debut at

Madison Square Garden when he was only eighteen. The first match of this fabulous new wrestler had prompted a standing ovation.

"Don't need any help. Stay," Taki ordered in a tone that made others hold their breath. He walked away and turned the corner, following the telltale aura. There was a construction site on the left side, a building on his right.

The aura trail led to—"Hamamatsucho, eh?" Taki muttered. "Why here?"

Taki figured the foreigner Hiya had mentioned was one of the Sharp brothers. If it was, they were on the right route. This was lucky, since the search for Makie had been launched before it had occurred to Taki to undergo the remote surgery. He had not had time to bring the brothers up to speed. Taki had talked to Don, but had only gotten out that Makie was gone when Don had hung up and rushed off. The brothers moved faster when given free rein anyway.

Someone called him from behind as Taki started to pick up his pace. "Hey. Wait up."

Taki swirled around and was confused. It was not Bucks Hiya who greeted him but Ota Gendo, the co-captain.

"What now?" Taki said, annoyed.

"Um, the captain told me to help you."

"It's okay, really. We might scare the client if we go together."

What Taki did not know was that Gendo was not alone. When Taki had left, the trainees had been distracted with watching him go. Bucks Hiya had swiftly transformed into what looked like a white plastic bag and slid into Gendo's pocket.

"It's okay. The Boss will be mad if I don't come with you." Gendo scratched his head.

"Okay, then," Taki said with a sigh. He was wasting too much time trying to get rid of Gendo. He might as well let him tag along. "Nice to meet you, by the way." Taki stuck out his hand.

"Yeah, you, too." Gendo took the offered hand and shook it. The next instant, the two bodies jumped apart, the air between them filling with tension and fear. Taki narrowed his eyes; he realized what the man was when he poured his Psy Power into his hand in order to put the unwanted helper to sleep.

The being inside Gendo groaned. He had been about to take Taki to the decayed land to kill him, the same way he had Mike. That was why he did not attack when he shook hands with Taki. When the Shus burned the insides of their prey and wore their skin, they inherited the human's qualities, including memories.

The human psyche was not powerful enough to have an effect on them. But as long as they were trying to pass themselves off as human, they had to rein in their sense of self and let the prey's nature take over. In Gendo's mind, he was much stronger and bigger than Taki. He had expected to overpower Taki easily. Taki's move was completely unexpected. Otherwise, he would not have missed the chance to attack when they shook hands. And the Psy Power had come as a shock; if he had known it would happen, he would not have made physical contact with Taki.

Something glinted in Taki's raised hand. The chromium-molybdenum steel barrel of the .44 Magnum reflected the moonlight. A bullet full of Psy Power flew from it, glowing like fall frost.

Gendo's right hand reached for his pocket, but not quickly enough. With an earth-shattering roar, the lance of blue fire penetrated the wrestler's thick chest. His large body shrank like a balloon. The bullet itself continued on, blasting the surface of the building behind. A Psy Power fire broke out.

Taki had been aiming at the bag-like white substance that had leaped out of Gendo's right hand. It fluttered to the ground and took off, expanding to the size and shape of a familiar human in the process. Taki tried to get off another shot, but the .44 Magnum's recoil was too powerful to allow him to aim

again quickly. He had prepared himself with his Psy Power and by tightening his muscles, but it was still hard to aim perfectly. He fired, but it was almost a random shot.

The second bullet boomed as the enemy slunk into the side street. The shot blew away a chunk of the building, turning it into blue fire. Taki clucked his tongue and turned the other direction, not even making an attempt to give chase. Makie was his top priority. Even if that meant leaving the enemy to roam free.

He put away his weapon and ran. He thought about Don and Mike. Probably one of them was dead, or worse, both of them.

"Wait up." An angry voice chased after him. Rather, a lot of voices. Taki glanced over his shoulder and started to run faster. The rest of the IPW team was behind him.

Taki ignored them. He was fast, maybe even faster than the wrestlers. Taki turned the corner and dashed down the next street, making sure the group was far back.

He was stunned. He stared at the beam-bearing wall of a building at a construction site, three meters high. Makie's aura's trail hovered in the air above him and then petered out. She must be walking in the air. It was impossible for Taki to jump that high, so he had to climb.

But his one moment of hesitation had given his pursuers enough time to catch up. A mix of footsteps came around the corner and down the street. Before he knew it, he was surrounded by an angry mob of giants. Twelve of them. They might only be trainees, but they were confident enough to defeat an amateur.

Taki gave a sigh.

3

It was a strange monorail that ran along the tracks that night. The brightly lit train seemed to be haunted. The only sound in the train was the machinery, running busily. It appeared to carry no one. There was no driver and no passengers, except one. A ravishingly beautiful woman was the sole occupant. She wore a three-piece suit and had a dark glint in her eyes. Her pale complexion seemed even whiter against the oppressive gloom of the dark windows. City lights burned in her deep dark eyes. Where was Makie going, sitting alone in that deserted train? Where would this nocturnal journey take her?

A dark, floppy thing dropped from the ceiling into her lap. It looked like a worm, or maybe a snake. Its flattened head darted toward the back of Makie's hand.

Makie jumped out of its way, grasped it, and shook it once. With a small, pitiful cry, its body erupted in fire and burned until it was nothing but a crisp, blackened husk. Makie tossed it aside without even looking at it.

The dark floor shifted beneath Makie's feet. The sensation was disconcerting, and she wondered what was happening. Then she realized it was not the floor itself that moved but hundreds of snakes, undulating like small waves. They covered the floor of the car. She looked up; there were more on the ceiling. They churned together as if they were a single living thing. Some climbed up Makie's legs, some dropped onto her head. Soon she had disappeared into a column of writhing black beings. More appeared. Soon they would cover every inch of the train.

At the end of the car, a half-transparent thing emerged out of nowhere. It was Hoki, the serpent handler. His body, which looked like a banged-up plastic bag, convulsed with laughter. By now Makie's body must have been covered by bite marks and full of poison, he thought. The poison in Hoki's snakes was powerful, there was no antivenom. Nothing could stop it, not even Psychic Power. Wickerman was the exception, because he had the family's blood. A detox mechanism had been built into his system at birth. But Hoki did not know that.

The monster's hysterical laughter rang through the

train car as the monorail kept running down the track. The wriggling stopped, and so did Hoki's laughter. He was confused. He trembled nervously, wondering what could have stopped his pets.

Something burst out of the piles of snakes. It was thick and rope-like, and it shook off the snakes as it moved upward. Hoki held his breath. Another serpent grew from the mountain of wriggling snakes, a dozen times thicker than the thickest of Hoki's pets.

Hoki was stunned. His snakes had merged into one huge, lumpy pillar of a snake. The huge snake's head was covered with bumps—no, the snake had a hundred heads. Some of them pulled away from the rest and turned toward Hoki. Then the entire creature lunged at him, all of the mouths open. Hoki's body disappeared in a wave of black. The huge snake shook, as if working Hoki's body down its gullet. Then it shifted its shape, shrinking into a cube and finally melting into sticky liquid, leaving a puddle on the floor.

Makie remained in her seat, her composure unruffled. There was not a single mark on her smooth, pale skin. She had jumped from a second-floor window and brushed off the poisonous snakes as if they were nothing, and she remained unscathed. What would be next?

The train kept going as Makie's vacant eyes stared toward the unknown destination.

. . .

Taki shoved his M29 toward the young man's forehead. The boy looked frightened but did not back down. Wordlessly, Taki put his gun back into the holster. He wasn't going to shoot an innocent person. Neither Hiya nor Gendo—or what was passing for them—was around, but Taki was sure it was watching from somewhere nearby.

He raised his arms in surrender. He didn't want to fight these young trainees, he just wanted to find Makie.

"Eat this!" The young man who shouted came charging toward Taki, his head low. He stood almost the same height as Taki but was much wider at the shoulder, with a much bigger build. He stopped, suddenly, an arm's length in front of Taki. The next second, another body leaped up behind him.

The second man did not know that the first man did not stop by himself. He just could not move any farther with Taki's fist against his forehead. Like a matador stopping a bull.

Taki bent his elbow, moving ever so slowly. He couldn't completely stop the 220-pound human bullet charging toward him, but he could absorb most of its energy—which he then promptly returned to the young man. The attacker, still in his crouch, was

blown back the way he had come. He flew three meters and landed on the ground with a painful thud.

"Whoa," yelled one of the other trainees. His tone expressed surprise, anger, and a little bit of awe. Faced with this enemy, the group's fire was renewed. They were born to fight. But this time they were in well over their heads.

Another of the wrestlers came at Taki. Taki slapped the boy's hand away and sent his huge body flying after his friend's. The only thing the man felt as his body hit the ground was a jolt. It was amazing, and not one of the trainees believed Taki's strength was purely muscle. It was something else, a mysterious force.

The wrestlers were trained athletes. They could take physical abuse. But not this. The trainee lay on the ground, unable to move. Not just his arms but his whole body was rigid, as if it were frozen. Two seconds later, five more of his friends were incapacitated. Those that remained edged back, realizing the situation.

Except one. There was a whoosh behind Taki, the sound of air being disrupted. Taki spun on his left foot and kicked with the right. The trainee slumped to the ground holding his broken knee.

"Not bad. Looks like Bucks trained you well," Taki said, sounding somewhat sad. "Here's my advice, though, before I bid you farewell. Choose a new leader who can keep the team together."

"What happened to him?" A trainee screamed, unable to contain his anger. "Did you shoot him?"

Taki turned toward them and unleashed a little of his Psy Power. A wave of energy hit the trainees, and they backed off.

"Where is he?" another of the boys asked in a subdued tone. "He doesn't just disappear."

"Doesn't matter," Taki replied. "Get down on your hands and knees over there by the wall." He pointed to one of the trainees.

"Huh?"

"You heard me. I haven't got all day, either." Taki took out his M29. There was no time for explanation, and he didn't want to have to force the issue. The trainee would never get over the humiliation if Taki forced him down. Fortunately, the puzzled young man complied.

Taki stepped onto the kneeling man's back and hooked his left hand on the edge of the wall. He climbed up three meters, causing the young men to gasp in awe.

There was a construction site on the other side of the wall. Makie's trail of dark aura continued onward and up—Makie must have gained the ability to walk in the air. His heart squeezed in his chest, wondering what other new powers the baby had bestowed on Makie. Taki followed the trail across and out of the site.

Space opened up in front of him. The dark shrubs and trees said he had arrived at Tennozu Park. In the distance, beyond the park, a white line ran to the south. What was it?

Taki looked harder and widened his eyes. It was a monorail. Something glinted darkly at the front. *Makie! I've found you!*

He was rocked by a wave of emotion. Every cell in his body shook as relief, joy, and new courage coursed through him.

Wait there, Makie. I'll be with you in a minute, he promised her inwardly. There was a burning sensation in his heart. Never before had he felt such strong love toward this demon woman.

He swallowed the sudden urge to run toward her and looked around. He was near the road. There were a lot of cars, most of them occupied taxis. Taki went out on the main street. He needed speed to catch up to the monorail. It was time for a more hard-line approach.

A white Charade drove along the road to his right, coming from the direction of the Ooi racetrack. It changed its direction a few meters in front of where Taki stood and charged across the road toward him.

Taki jumped back just in time. As the car passed, a young woman grinned at him from the passenger window. A young man and woman, also smiling, sat in the

backseat. Taki broke into a broad smile, too. The car buzzed by. The young people watched him from the rear window, laughing at the man who stood in the middle of the road, probably thinking that he must be a little crazy. But the smiles quickly disappeared when they saw the large gun in the man's hand.

A shaft of bright light flashed in the midnight gloom. The nickel-plated bullet entered the Charade from behind and zipped through the backseat. There was only so much explosive power a fifteen-gram bullet could carry, but this one had been infused with Taki's Psy Power. It drilled through the seat between the man and the woman, zipped between the driver's and passenger's seats, and rammed into the dashboard, lodging itself in the engine, gushing with Psy Power. With a boom, the hood was blown up and away. The car's engine spouted blue fire.

The young man behind the wheel screamed and slammed on the brakes, turning the wheel vigorously. The spinning Charade brushed by a moving Celica, which was sent out of control. The Charade crashed into the guardrail and burst into flames—not the result of a gasoline leak.

Taki ran to the screaming young men, who were both on fire. The two of them, engulfed in the blue fire, were dancing like madmen. Of course, they did not have the presence of mind to see that the fire did

not have any heat and would not harm them. The sight of his friend ablaze amplified each one's fear.

Taki pushed them aside and hopped into the car. There was an aura of Psy Power remaining. He grabbed the wheel, shifted into gear, and stepped on the accelerator. The engine had been destroyed by his .44 Magnum, but he didn't need it. The car was now powered by Psy Power.

The youths finally stopped screaming and watched in awe. The driver of the Celica came running to watch the seemingly destroyed car move. Taki backed the car up a few feet, whirled it around, and stomped the accelerator. He let his Psy Power flow from his hands and feet into the vehicle. The car had been transformed into an inorganic organism. It gathered speed as it gobbled up the Psy Power, vibrating against the road.

Monorails bound to Haneda normally stopped at the Ooi racetrack, the Ryutsu Center, Showajima, and Haneda Airport. Taki could not count on it to stop at any of the regular stations. It could stop anywhere on the line.

The aura trail had not thinned out, suggesting Makie's safety. The question was, was the enemy on the train with her? Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead thinking about it.

Within three minutes, Taki had caught up with the train. The Charade chased the train, moving along the

roads and headed toward the Ooi racetrack. Soon he would have to get on Capital Freeway 1. He could get on the expressway from the Katsushima ramp, just beyond the Samezu Bridge. The exit was near the tracks. If the train kept going, Taki would have no trouble keeping it in sight. The train could travel 40 kph at the fastest. With the help of Psychic Power and some magic, Taki could manage that.

Taki entered the highway. Almost immediately, sirens wailed behind him. Police cars appeared in the rearview mirror. Three. Taki wondered if they had seen him steal the car or if someone had called them.

Taki had to do some quick thinking. He approached Samezu Bridge, then drove across it and entered the freeway from the Katsushima ramp. The police cars followed.

Taki didn't have time for the cops; he had to keep the train in sight. He pulled out his M29, slowed the car down to 30 kph and waited until the police cars caught up with him.

"Stop the car right now," said a voice over the police car's loudspeaker.

Taki, using only the rearview mirror to aim, pointed his gun at the nose of the first police car.

"Pull the car over. Now."

Taki squeezed the trigger. The bullet shattered the back window and buried itself in the grille of the

police car. He hardly used any Psy Power this time. There was a heavy thud, and blue-and-orange fire spilled from under the hood. The car stalled and spun, blocking the two other police cars. Flames erupted as the cars crushed into one another. Fire licked the windshields. This time, some of it was real. By the time Taki and his Charade were two hundred meters away, the police cars were completely engulfed in flames.

I didn't want to hurt them. Please let them make it out, Taki prayed.

SKY WAR

PART SIX

1

THE DRIVER'S side window shattered. Something that looked like a black panther buzzed past Taki's nose a second after he ducked. It flew across the car and smacked into the passenger window.

It was slithery. A dark blue reptile. Hoki, the serpent handler, again! Taki had heard what had happened in Hibiya Park from Don and Wickerman. Without losing speed, Taki pushed in the car's cigarette lighter. The two rear windows broke in succession, and two more snakes dropped onto the seat. They slithered toward him, fangs bared.

Taki slapped them away. The lighter popped and Taki grabbed it. He pulled it back and brought it up to his mouth. He blew gently over the top of the hot lighter, and blue fire spewed from his mouth. Taki was not actually spewing fire but rather the Psy Power in his breath. When it made contact with the lighter's heat, it was like a flamethrower. The seat burned blue. The snakes writhed in pain and then vanished without a trace.

Taki had almost caught up with the monorail. He reached through the broken driver's side window and aimed his weapon at the train. There was no sign of the enemy, but that didn't mean they weren't there.

Chills hit him. The sensation came from the train; Taki felt it clearly. It was a signal. The enemy *wanted* him to know where they were. Taki pulled the trigger, and a millisecond later the car at the end of the train burst into a ball of blue fire.

Taki felt the enemy's nervousness inside the train. They wondered how Taki had found them. Two more howls from the .44 Magnum, both on target. Taki sensed the presence of the snake handler. Wind whipped his hair about when Taki ducked. One of the snakes had gone right into the window, and the other one dropped into the fire raging on the seat.

Car lights appeared in front of Taki. The Charade was a little too close to the middle of the road. Taki

pulled the wheel and the car veered left, just missing the oncoming car.

That was when he saw the guardrail. He turned the wheel back, but it was too late. The left corner of the car crashed into it, sending fragments everywhere. Taki didn't slow down, though. He kept his foot on the accelerator. The screech of metal on metal was loud as the car rubbed along the rail. Sparks flew.

Inside the car, more bullets were fired and more snakes appeared. The train and the car were a dozen meters apart. The snakes disappeared into the Psy Power fire. Taki was out of ammo.

"Damn! How did that happen?" However intense it got, Taki never lost count of bullets. Frustrated and angry with himself, he stuck the gun between his knees and opened the barrel. He took fresh bullets from the left pocket of his jacket and started loading. Taki made a point of not carrying a quick loader. Not even a half-moon clip that housed three bullets. They were bulky and awkward. He finished, closed the cylinder, and had just stuck the gun out of the window when he heard blaring sirens. Six police cars raced toward him.

Taki bit his lip. It wasn't really a surprise. He had given them reason to chase him, after what had happened on the expressway. Clearly, the Black Guard headquarters had not contacted the police to let them

know Taki was all right. Either that, or extremists from the other side had gotten to them first.

The car shook, and Taki knew why. Every one of the police cars emitted nasty, demonic vibrations. They were all enemies. Taki's mouth curved into a smile. No more pulling punches.

The lights got closer. Taki's car, a machine designed to run on the road, floated into the air. Sparks flew behind him as the rear bumper scraped the road. It went over the throng of police cars and landed on the road with a resounding thud. Taki let go of the wheel and turned his head. With both hands, he raised his .44 Magnum and pointed it out the rear window.

Without aiming, he slammed six bullets into the first car. Psy-Power-induced fire shook the car with a roar. The cars and their demonic drivers were instantly consumed by the fire. It whipped around, covering all the vehicles. Soon all the cars had turned to a sea of blue Psychic Power fire.

Taki glanced at the monorail. It was steadily heading toward Haneda Airport. There was no more indication of wicked energy, only Makie's dark aura trailing behind the train as it traveled in the dark.

"I'll catch you at the airport, Makie," Taki said.

. . .

The airport was half lit. Taki parked the Charade in front of the entrance to the domestic terminal—where the monorail entered the airport—and went inside. It was midnight. The airport was deserted, save for a couple of clerks.

Taki found a bank of phone booths in the corner. He ran to it and pressed a few buttons. A quiet voice answered, and Taki said, "Lee? It's Taki."

"Are you all right?"

Taki found Lee's voice reassuring. There was no danger of the line being monitored; he had sent Psy Power through the phone line to throw off any surveillance. "Yeah, I'm fine so far. Listen, I'm at Haneda Airport. What about you?"

"I'm here at the new location. They come in varying styles, these Shu folks. I just politely asked one of them to leave five minutes ago."

Taki could easily imagine what kind of fierce battle "politely asking someone to leave" entailed. The loft was not safe any longer. They wanted Lee. The extremists from the other side were probably up in arms over the Black Guard interfering in the Shus' plans. That spoke to how badly they wanted Makie's baby.

"Call headquarters. Ask them to send you some help."

"They're already here," Lee said.

Taki felt relieved. "So are you ready?"

"Yes. Everything's under control. We have it all set up. We just need the new residents to put inside," Lee said.

"I'll get them there soon. Stay alert," Taki said.

"Roger. You, too." Lee's tone remained calm, as if he and Taki were discussing a baseball game. Taki hung up and raced for the underground platform. He was exhausted— he had spent too much of his Psy Power.

The monorail platform was completely dark. He found his way down to it easily, though, with the help of his ultra senses. By the time he reached the bottom, his breath was ragged and heavy. He leaned on a stone pillar, overcome by sudden fatigue. He wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

He took a cigarette from his inside pocket and put it in his mouth. He lit a match and blew at it lightly. His breath created a blue Psy Power fireball, but it was faint, pathetically so, and gone in an instant. Taki smiled bitterly and lit the cigarette. When he had finished his fifth puff, he heard a dull clanking sound, not far off. He pinched the end of the cigarette to put it out and put it back into his pocket instead of dropping it on the platform. He didn't want to leave any trace behind. For the enemy, lifting DNA from a cigarette butt was no feat. The enemy was capable of locating the subject and finding out the intensity level of his Psy Power, even just from a butt.

A glimmer of white light appeared at the end of the tunnel. Taki took out his .44 Magnum. It felt heavier than usual. Extremely heavy. And bigger than he remembered, but maybe it was because he was so tired. Suddenly he could not hold it, and with a thud, the chunk of iron dropped to the concrete floor. He stared at his hands. They looked small and soft, like the hands of a boy. Taki felt his bones shrinking.

Not again, he thought.

It was Inn—the member of the Shu family whom Taki had confronted on the expressway with Mike. Inn did not have the capability to search for an aura, so she must have been following Taki. There was always the possibility that the enemy had located Makie when she got out of the loft, but he didn't know how they could have. It had to have been Taki that led Inn here.

"You got tricked twice." Inn's voice rang through his shrinking skull. Taki ground his teeth. *"I will gladly take over your place. You go and become an atom element on this planet."*

Taki spun around. Inn's head was thirty meters above the ground. The same egg-shaped ivory ball he had seen on the expressway before quietly floated up from under the stairway, about four meters from where Taki stood.

Taki knew how his regression linked to the growth

of the assailant's body. Taki's eyes were ten centimeters from the ground. Without a sound, the smooth shell cracked and fell away. A person stepped from inside; how it fit into the small eggshell was a mystery.

"I am going to take your clothes. Even she will not be able to tell it is not you."

Taki groaned, but his voice came out as the gentle cooing of a baby. He could not see anything. His vision was blocked by his clothing, piled up around him. Soon he was an infant, buried in the fabric.

The ground shook as the monorail arrived. Inn, naked and wearing Taki's face, moved toward the clothes to claim them as his own. A pale-skinned baby, five or six months old, crawled out of the puddle of clothes and sat on top of them. "Taki's" foot stepped onto the baby's back.

"I am not going to put you to rest peacefully. I am going to squash you, and you are going to die screaming in pain." A cruel smile curved up Taki's face. He lifted his foot, ready to stomp on the baby. They were in the shadow of a huge pillar, safely guarded from view of the monorail.

Inn's leg suddenly seized, as if he had a huge cramp. His body flew backward, becoming thinner and smaller as the infant Taki started to grow back into a full-grown man. The monorail door opened, and a handsome lady, the solitary passenger, got off.

A ten-year-old boy in baggy clothes called out her name.

"Makie!"

Makie did not answer. She walked right by Taki and up the stairs, holding herself tall with elegance and beauty. With each step, the lights above her head turned on, outlining her shadow on the floor.

"Makie!" Taki bolted after her but only got a few steps before he had to stop. He grimaced in acute pain. The rapid shrinking and growing of his body had caused physical imbalance. He was getting bigger. His muscles and bones became more defined as his ten-year-old body became that of a thirteen-year-old. His Psychic Power returned and amplified as he aged.

When he looked up the stairs again, Makie's slender frame was nowhere to be seen. The boy stumbled his way toward the stairs, panting with exhaustion. He had experienced twenty-six years of maturing in the space of a few minutes. The miracle had taken its toll on his heart. His vessels had gotten thicker, but there was not yet enough blood to pump through his still-lengthening body. The weight of his ammo didn't help matters much. Finally he managed to gather the strength to pick up his M29 and follow Makie.

While Taki struggled to make it up the stairs, Makie, seemingly with a single purpose, was headed toward the staff room. Across the room, other shadows

emerged from another entrance: security officers on a routine patrol. They both carried retractable batons. When folded they were thirty centimeters long, but when extended they became three times longer.

"Who is it?" one of the officers called out, then gasped at the sight of the beautiful woman.

Makie kept going.

"Hey, you. Wait." One of the uniformed men placed his hand on her shoulder. The second his hand touched her, his eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed. The other officer, watching, decided it was best to stay back. The woman freaked him out, and he needed backup. He ran toward the alarm panel.

Makie's right hand extended and waved through the air, as if she were brushing away a piece of dust. The air stirred, turning into a gust of wind as it moved across the room. It swept the officer off his feet as if he weighed no more than a feather. He flew head-first into a wall and slid to the floor, unconscious. Makie walked away as if nothing had happened.

A few seconds later, Taki, now looking like a fifteen-year-old boy, bolted into the room. He was just beginning to look like his adult self, with a bit of hardness to his features. He scanned the room, looking for Makie. He spotted the two officers, knew what had happened, and sprinted down the hall.

2

LEE STOOD at the end of the quay, about a ten-minute walk from the loft. Dark waves crashed onto the shore. It had been thirty minutes since he had gotten the call from Taki. There had been three attacks from the enemy since Taki underwent the surgery and left to chase after Makie. Lee had gotten rid of every one of them with a single blow. He had told Taki that he had requested help, but he fought them on his own.

His help was arriving just now. A barge sailed in silently, from the direction of Shiodome. The barge had not been outfitted with a hush kit; it did not require the engine to be running. It ran on Psy Power.

The stern was loaded with something large, covered with a waterproof net. A woman stood in the bow, facing forward. She wore a denim jacket, a T-shirt, and jeans, and carried a small handbag. The woman paused, as if she were scrutinizing Lee, then nodded and waved to the cabin behind her.

The barge pulled alongside the pier, and Lee jumped into it with his usual agility.

"Saigo Mizuki from Japan branch. Nice to meet you," the woman said with a bow.

"Lee from Peking branch," Lee replied, though it was unnecessary. They had already checked each other's identity, using their Psychic Power.

"So is that it?" Lee asked. He pointed to the net-covered object.

"Yes. Just junk to me. You can do whatever you want with it," Mizuki said.

Lee didn't elaborate on what was beneath the net or to what use he wanted to put it. "Please take me inside."

Mizuki lifted her right hand, and the barge started whirling again. They sailed beyond Shiodome to Hamarikyu. There was a secret waterway there that ran all the way to Tokyo. The tunnel was preferred by the Black Guard when they wanted to ship goods or escort VIPs quickly and quietly. Twenty percent of the Tokyo sewer system had some kind of a secret passage like this. But the Black Guard had not built it. Whoever designed the sewer system must have known that there were passages that led to another world and connected the system to them. Ten percent of the tunnels had been proven safe by the Black Guard, but the rest were considered dangerous, fused with the other world. It caused weird accidents. For example, a VIP boat, on its way to Tokyo Bay, wound up in the

fourth station on Mount Kangchenjunga. The world did not belong only to the human race. Demons had playgrounds all over the tunnels they used to venture above whenever they liked.

"How were they?" Mizuki asked. She referred to his multiple fights with the Shu family.

"Nothing too ridiculous," Lee commented, his eyes looking out into the water. The surface of the water reflected the glimmer of light shining down from the pier. In the dark of the night it looked mysterious, like a second moon.

"Wow. You've got some confidence there," Mizuki said, amazement obvious in her tone. "The Shu family almost wiped the Black Guard off the map seven thousand years ago. That, my friend, is ridiculous."

"A battle is all about survival," Lee replied as if muttering to himself. "That is how I always enter into one, whether my opponents are the Shus or some low-level demons. I just go and fight to survive. It's simple as that."

Mizuki fell silent, not knowing how to reply.

Soon the barge was a solitary sailor on the dark water. Mizuki turned around and watched a red light blinking in the distance behind the barge. It was the Tokyo Offing Light Buoy of Keihin Port. The barge was headed due east, to an island five kilometers ahead.

"We'd better get it out now," Mizuki said.

Lee looked to the stern. A soft sound came from the area of the deck, and the ropes that tied down the net dropped away. The net was thrown overboard, into the undulating water. Beneath it was a small submarine, five meters in length. Its ballast was less than three tons. It was a boat designed for spying underwater. Nobody knew why Lee had requested it, only that he had said it was necessary.

The crane whirred to life. It latched onto the submarine and lifted it from the deck and set it down in the dark water with a splash. Without a word, Lee hopped from the boat to the top of the submarine. His eyes closed, and his expression changed to one of profound concentration. He looked like a young philosopher fathoming a deep thought. His eyes fluttered open.

"They're here," he mumbled. "I've been waiting for this."

Mizuki dropped her bag onto the deck of the boat. She was a fighter, too. "How many?"

"Ten."

"What do we do?"

"We fight them. We can't move from here."

"How are we going to fight?" Mizuki's voice was calm.

"Shhh." Lee turned to starboard, his arms moving

in a gentle arc. He grabbed hold of his attacker as just a slight breeze fluffed his clothes.

"Now," Lee ordered calmly.

Mizuki moved toward the edge of the boat and put her leg over the rail. She was going to jump to the submarine. She whipped her head around when she heard a sound.

From Lee's expression, she could tell he heard it, too. It was the unmistakable buzzing of a motor.

3

A BOAT approached. It was dark, without so much as running lights. The barge's searchlight turned on, casting white streaks across the dark water.

Something moved in the water. A small shadow surfaced and jumped onto the boat with superb agility. It surged forward, curled into a ball. Mizuki did not have time to react before she was flung back by eldritch energy.

The shadow leaped over her head. He landed on the deck of the sub with a heavy thud and swiveled around to attack Lee at breakneck speed.

Vrrr. The motor screamed. The searchlight's beam

fell on the attacker, allowing them to see him. The dark shadow appeared to be wearing a diving wetsuit, but the surface texture was not smooth rubber but something gnarly and rippling. Mizuki's eyes were glued to his legs. They were thick and bulging. The strangest part was below his ankles. His feet appeared to be fused with skis, two meters long.

He dashed and leaped toward Lee, giving him a wicked blow to the face. The man momentarily lost his balance but soon righted himself. His body rotated, hitting the attacker and slamming him to the deck.

Mizuki gasped in amazement as the attacker's body sizzled and crumbled into nothing. She stared at Lee. What kind of power did this man have? A pleasant sea wind caressed his youthful face. There was no time to bask in the moment, however. The sound of the motor was closer. More dark shadows jumped onto the boat, one after another. There was the clinking sound of their strange feet as they hit the deck—by the sound of it, the skis were made of steel. A shadow jumped at Mizuki, his long, sharp foot aiming for her face. She slapped it away and unleashed her powerful Psy Power. The assailant dropped to the deck and slid, sending sparks flying.

Mizuki was wobbly on her feet; suddenly she felt

weak. Lee jumped from the submarine back onto the boat and crouched beside her.

"Don't stand up," a low voice ordered.

"What are you going to do about it?" Lee's voice asked as the black shadows swarmed the boat. His arms moved, and his slender body looked as if it were dancing gracefully.

Mizuki held her breath. There was a buzzing in the area of the enemies' knees, which sounded like the motor noise Mizuki and Lee had heard just before the attack. The noise came from an engine built into the assailants' bodies so they could travel through the water. They spread out, surrounding Mizuki and Lee.

They moved all at once, as if responding to a silent signal. Suddenly Mizuki's vision was a blur, like a pigment splashed on water. With the world falling apart like drops of liquid, Mizuki blinked. Her vision cleared. They were gone, but there was a spot of some foul water smearing the spot where the invaders had stood. Wind whipped her cheeks as she looked around for the invaders. *Where did they go?*

"What do we do?" a male voice from the control deck shouted. "They could be lurking in the water!"

"We should go back. There's no other way," Lee said with absolute certainty.

"No! We're almost there!" Mizuki shouted. But the boat turned and soundlessly cruised toward the shore, leaving the submarine floating on the water.

"We screwed up," Mizuki mumbled.

"Yes." Lee's controlled voice brought Mizuki a sense of security. "But how did they . . ."

The two Black Guards watched the orange submarine fade away in the light.

"No!" Lee yelled. A second later, an awful smell shot up Mizuki's nostrils. "Put a Psychic Power shield around the boat," Lee shouted to the man in the control room. "Right down to the bottom."

A second later, a familiar feeling of energy prickled Lee's skin. The stink was gone. Psy Power had pushed the smell, and what was causing it, away. Mizuki leaned over the side of the barge and gasped in shock. "The water. It's boiling!"

Lee got closer and looked down. She was right. The ocean sizzled and crackled angrily. The water lit by the barge's searchlight was a particularly nasty color. Something strange had mixed into the water.

"The submarine," Mizuki muttered. At her signal, the light swung around behind them, leaving a trail of illumination. Smoke engulfed the submarine. They could almost hear the sound of the boat melting. Slowly, the submarine's tail sank into the water, leaving the melting nose facing up to the skies.

Mizuki's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Fish will disappear from Tokyo Bay for a great while."

"They'll chalk it up to the red tide," Lee replied. "What about our boat?"

"Don't worry. The Psychic Power shield is special order," said the male voice from the control deck. "We're perfectly safe."

Mizuki looked at Lee and smiled. "We pulled it off," she said in a low voice.

Lee nodded. "It was a total success." The submarine continued to melt in the simmering water. Covered in the Psy Power barrier, the boat cruised across the raging water back to Ooi Pier. The sea returned to normal as they reached Kawasaki. Soon, a thoughtful smile appeared on Mizuki's face.

There was a roar in the distance, so loud it shook the boat. Mizuki grabbed the rail and looked around in alarm. "Are they back for more?"

She and Lee let their Psy Power course through their bodies, forming an extra protective shield. They approached the dock and the warehouse where they had picked up Lee. The sound had come from beyond the warehouse walls.

Mizuki opened her eyes wide. The wall of the warehouse bulged outward, then ripped open. Something long, large and white burst out of it, collapsing the warehouse behind it. It was the nose of a jumbo jet.

The boat did not have time to evade the plane. The aircraft didn't even try to take off but rolled across the dock, coming straight for the water. It nose-dived into the bay, sending out a tremendous wave that swallowed the boat whole. Mizuki tumbled out of the boat and into the water.

4

MAKIE FINALLY made it to the airfield. It was quiet at night, with none of the hustle and bustle day would bring. The position lights were on for any emergency landing, and the control tower was lit.

The airport alarm sounded. Someone must have found the unconscious security guards. The commotion did not disturb her calm expression. She stopped at the entrance to the hangar. The doors rolled back the moment Makie stopped in front of it.

The alarm wailed louder. The building was filled with the sound of running footsteps. Makie did not even look back. The hangar door opened fully, and the lights inside clicked on, one by one, illuminating the Boeing 747 sitting inside. The plane started to roll, advancing toward Makie slowly. The cockpit was

empty and the engine was silent. The huge aircraft turned around and slid from its lodging place out into the dark night.

Makie stood in front of it. She turned and made for the B runway. The jet followed, like an obedient dog.

A voice called out in the distance. "Makie!" It was Taki, restored to his adult self. He looked out at her through a window of the office building. For some mysterious reason, Makie had pulled the airplane out of its nest. Was she going to fly? If so, Taki had to be on that plane. He was not going to try to stop her. He was convinced that the series of bizarre behaviors she had displayed was not the result of a nervous breakdown but of something else. It seemed that something, maybe someone, else was controlling Makie's actions. Taki wanted to see where it was taking her and why.

Taki left the window and ran down the hall, headed for the stairway. The thunder of footsteps came toward him, fast. A group of about ten security officers came around the corner. Taki whipped around and ran toward the stairs.

"Stop!" yelled one of the guards. But it was the officers who stopped. Taki sprinted straight down the hall toward the crowd of stunned officers. Just as his body was about to make contact with the officers, he reached out and touched the first one gently. He fell to the ground, knocked out by Taki's Psy Power. He

touched them one by one, shivers running down their spines just before they hit the floor. One of the uniformed men, trying to stop him, swung his baton and froze, wide-eyed. Taki dodged the baton and gave the officer's throat one push with his index finger, sending chills through his body and knocking him unconscious. Ten seconds to bring down ten grown men.

Taki left them and dashed down the stairs and out onto the tarmac. He was just in time to see the big airplane sliding by. And the dark, slender shadow that walked before it.

"Makie!" Taki shouted. He ran after her.

The jet was just entering the runway. Haneda had three runways—A, B, and C. Currently only B and C were in use. The Boeing made its way toward runway B. There were no steps nearby, and none came rolling out onto the runway. How was she going to get on the plane? Taki wondered. Walk on air?

The airplane tipped to the right. The beautiful woman advanced toward the plane as the tip of its right wing touched the ground. The empty jumbo jet offered its silver wing to the alien beauty.

Makie did not get in. Instead she walked to the wing's base and leaped onto it with a cat-like agility.

Taki ran toward the plane, which had started to taxi down the runway. It was eerily silent, with no

whine of the plane's revving engine echoing through the dark. The engine had not started. Still, the 350-ton aircraft glided along the runway.

Taki reached the area under the door, but the jet suddenly picked up speed, making it harder for him to catch up. Sirens blared behind him, and shafts of lights pierced the darkness. The door was suddenly out of his reach. Taki kicked the ground, letting his Psy Power churn through his body. He sped up, and the door got closer, then started to pull away again. He reached, leaped into the air, and managed to get the fingers of one hand around the handle.

His fingers were pulled by the weight of his body as his legs swept behind him. The jet ran faster, whipping his body sideways. His fingers were lodged behind the handle, down to the second joints. His grip could slip easily. Wind roared in his ears, and he felt like his body was being torn apart.

The plane reached the place where the pilot would usually pull the control bar down to lift the plane's nose and take off. Even without a captain, the plane lifted into the air.

Taki's body was pulled downward. The plane climbed up, moving far away from the runway; the airport and the sea and the fields got smaller and smaller.

Taki fixed his gaze on the door. He slid his free hand

under his arm and pulled out his M29. He pointed it at the middle of the door and pulled the trigger, unleashing all the Psy Power he had left. Both he and the door blasted inward and landed on the floor.

M29 in hand, he stood. His legs were wobbly, but he managed to lift the door and place it back over the entrance. The air rushed around it with a hissing sound. He banged his body against the door to shut it tight, and the hissing stopped.

Taki walked into the cabin. There were three rows of seats. Normally, oxygen masks would have dropped from the ceiling at the time of the air pressure change, but not today. He could have used the oxygen—he felt smothered. The air had been sucked out when he busted in. The Boeing was nine thousand meters in the air and the heat was not on; the cabin was freezing.

Taki struggled to steady himself and managed to settle in a seat as the plane ascended. He was exhausted. He had very little Psychic Power left, and he needed to rest.

Where is Makie headed? Taki wondered.

After just a few minutes, he felt his Psy Power returning. With a little effort Taki was able to tell that the plane had climbed to ten thousand meters and reached a speed of Mach 1.2 and was flying level. It was beyond the boundary of human knowledge.

A few more minutes passed, and Taki shivered.

The temperature was almost zero. He could control his body temperature with Psy Power, but doing so would mean it would take longer for his power to stabilize. The chill sank into his bones.

Taki was not worried about Makie, though she was clearly unstable. He felt strangely relaxed and optimistic, as if everything would work out eventually.

Twenty-five thousand meters and still going up.

Where are you going, Makie? Is our baby all right?

A heart-crushing pain shot through his body as if someone were sitting on his chest. The air at this height was too thin, and his body had been oxygen-deprived too long. The jet's air system hadn't activated, meaning the cabin hadn't pressurized and there was no air being pumped inside. Even with Taki's Psy Power, generating oxygen was another story. He would die soon.

Taki, his muscles seizing up, looked out the window. The plane flew above the clouds. Below it was a vast stretch of water dotted with land, like lumps of clay. At this rate, they would soon break through to outer space. Makie must have used some of her Psy Power to keep the hull of the plane together at this altitude. Taki's lungs screamed for oxygen, but he felt strangely happy. Darkness enveloped the plane, and he looked out at the Earth, the shining blue planet.

From beyond the planet, something emerged, spreading its blinding light out into the universe. The

sun. *Chase away the darkness with the touch of your kind, warm hand. Bless my baby,* Taki prayed as he gradually lost consciousness. He could see it. Makie stood on the plane, basking in the mysteries of the universe and the blessing of the sun. He saw the baby, too. This was what she wanted. This was what Makie and the baby wanted. The meaning of all beings, all creatures, something even the Black Guard could not grasp. The world was divided into two. This side, where humans dwelled, and the other.

No. The world was one and the same. Taki finally understood. The physiology of eternity governed two worlds, making them one. The baby was proof of that—a mystery of the universe that went beyond their wildest imagination. It took their breath away. This was the reason. Taki and his colleagues fought for this.

Suddenly, the plane surged downward. Taki closed his eyes. Makie and the baby were satisfied, he felt it. His mind was a jungle of thought, but that was clear to him.

His feeling of calm was interrupted by a wave of hatred. The enemy was here, lurking, keeping quiet. Like Taki, it was getting its wind back. The invader must have gone through quite a struggle to get on the plane. It sat on the front seat.

Taki stood, his M29 at the ready. His Psychic

Power was back up to 60 percent. It was still hard to breathe, but at least on that front he and the enemy were on a level playing field. If he could get through the first attack, he would come out of this fine. He let his power roll into his legs and walked down the aisle.

5

"YOU SURVIVED. Well done." Inn's voice bounced into the back of Taki's brain. The pain in his voice was clear.

"What's wrong? You're slipping. I can feel your presence," Taki said. Inn's egg was five meters ahead, sitting in one of the aisle seats. Taki held down the urge to throw up, brought on by Inn's transforming spell. This time he was ready for it and able to use his Psy Power to bounce it back. "I'm not going to fall for that again. What do you think? Third time's a charm," Taki said.

"That's right," Inn said, taunting Taki. *"You won't get the third chance."*

The egg floated into the air and came toward him. Taki fired his .44 Magnum right into the middle of it.

. . .

The egg disappeared, like a bubble popping, as Taki tried to squeeze the trigger again. Taki's first shot should have hit the plane, but there was no hole anywhere, as if the bullet had disappeared. *Weird.* He glanced around. There was no fragment of eggshell in sight. Had it ever been there to begin with? Taki pondered for a while, wondering if the whole thing hadn't been an oxygen-deprived hallucination. He held the gun and went into the cockpit.

The enemy could still be hiding somewhere. The tension eased, and his breathing with it. There was no sign of Inn, so Taki went back to his seat. But he could not relax. Something did not feel right. He could have sworn something had jumped out of the egg, just as it popped out of existence. *That's ridiculous. If the egg was a hallucination, anything that came out of it was as well.*

His eyelids drooped; an overwhelming feeling of fatigue closed in on him. He struggled to stand, realizing the fatigue was not normal. He walked to the cockpit door and examined its surface.

Spot on. He turned around and went back to where he had fired his first shot.

"My shot hit this door. But I don't see the bullet hole. That means this is not the place where I took the shot. I knew I saw something—your transformed self, wasn't it, Inn? You're trying to swallow me up and

suck all the energy out of me. I need to go back to the real world. Better make a hole where it's supposed to be." Taki enunciated clearly as if Inn were somewhere nearby.

Taki aimed his gun and squeezed the trigger. The bullet punched a big black hole in the door. The plane's cabin moved strangely, as if it were melting. The cabin—the real one—pitched forward. The plane was coming in for a landing.

The egg, or rather the pieces of it, sat in the aisle. Taki heard a groan from behind and whirled around. Was that Inn's real body? It was impossible to tell, because it kept changing shape. It was a Pithecanthropus. It was Taki. It was an Indian. A medieval knight . . . an ancient Chinese warrior . . . a tiger, a lion, a dinosaur, a bacterium, a boat . . .

And the plane. This plane.

One thing remained the same as it went through transformations. A black hole, about the size of a .44 Magnum bullet.

The plane started to shake as they reentered Earth's atmosphere. Unable to keep his feet, Taki fell backward. The back of his hand hit the armrest of a chair, and his gun tumbled away. The cabin started to heat up, and Taki hoped whatever had protected the plane from freezing in space was still in place, or else they would all burn to a crisp.

Inn jumped him. A white-haired old man, puma, American cedar; his form kept changing. Taki thrust out his hands and Inn flew back. The power of Psy Power. Inn's face changed again but finally settled into one face. Taki kicked him square in the jaw and sent him flying. Taki turned away to pick up his gun, and a wave of energy swept through the cabin. The windows shattered, and Taki was flung forward and hit the floor, hard.

He jumped to his feet and peered out the window. There was a building, but it was what he *didn't* see that worried him.

The wings were gone. The jet was sliding down the middle of a street. It had struck the buildings and lost its wings as it descended. Taki saw a cross-street go by, but he had no idea where they were.

A painful groan came from the front seat. Inn, a creature that had worn ten thousand faces, stared at Taki. In this form, Inn's white, female hand leaned heavily on the seat, and the tiger's claws at the end of it tore the seat fabric. Inn slumped over.

Taki did not know where to aim the shot, but he pulled the trigger anyway. The bullet must have hit something, because what looked like Inn's organs splattered onto the floor behind it.

Inn fell flat onto the ground. The next instant, an ivory-colored ball emerged from its mouth. Taki was

about to pull the trigger again but stopped. The battle was over. The eggshell was covered with fine cracks. It suddenly looked very fragile. The plane shook, and the eggshell shattered into bits.

The fragments did not re-form, and nothing came out of it except some thick residue. It filled the space with a nauseating smell, a million times worse than the sulfur scent of rotten eggs. It was so powerful it seemed the world had been steeped in it.

Taki had no time to pause. He rushed to the door and looked out the little window. The wingless jet was still speeding along the street, knocking down power poles and destroying neon signs in the process.

He was in the middle of the city, three meters off the ground. People flattened themselves on the ground to avoid being hit by the giant plane. It buzzed past the head of a drunken man taking a piss. "Huh? You wanna piece of me?" he spat out. When he saw the plane, he went back to his business, probably wondering if he should give up drinking forever if it was going to cause hallucinations like that.

The plane approached a building that appeared to be a warehouse. It looked *very* familiar, and then he realized they were back exactly where they had started, at Makie's safe house.

Taki put his back against the wall opposite the hatch and fired. The hatch blasted away, and wind

rushed inside. He was surprised the plane had not yet been crushed. Makie's Psy Power must still be protecting it. Taki ran toward the hatch, leaning forward, fighting against the wind.

He stuck his head out of the door and watched the road whip by beneath them. They were headed straight for the warehouse and not slowing down. There was no way they could avoid a direct collision.

There was a deafening crash as the plane hit the warehouse. The nose lifted and there was the squeal of metal-on-metal as it skimmed over the roof. The plane cleared the warehouse and hit the ground. The dark water of the bay raced toward them. Taki caught a sight of a boat. Someone was in the bow.

Taki prepared to jump just as the plane was thrust into the black water, pushing him back into the cabin.

BATTLE OVER A FETUS

PART SEVEN

1

TAKI WOKE up to the light.

"Are you awake?" a calm voice asked. Something blurred in the bright light and became a human face. Two faces: a middle-aged man with Coke-bottle glasses and a good-looking guy. The Director and Lee.

Taki looked at his surroundings. He was in a clean white hospital room. He was in the Hospital in Arisugawa Park. He had never been admitted as a patient but had visited colleagues there many times.

"How did I . . . What happened?" Taki tried to move and grimaced. His body ached all over. His Psy

Power had recovered considerably but was still weak. One big blow and he would be easily done in.

"Stay still," the Director said, toying with his thick glasses. "You hit your head. And your elbow's pretty banged up. You won't be able to use your .44 Magnum for a while."

"Are you the real Director?" Taki said sarcastically. He remembered all too well how one of the Shus had impersonated the Director and blitz-attacked them during their meeting. The Director smiled, and that was all the proof Taki needed.

Taki smiled back but tensed up again almost immediately. "Where's Makie?"

The Director and Lee looked at each other.

"You didn't find her somewhere around the plane?" Taki asked. "I followed her onto the plane, but then I was attacked by Inn Shu, and I lost her aura trail when we hit the water."

"Sorry." Lee shook his head. "But that doesn't mean she's dead. It's just that she's nowhere to be found."

"I know. You're right." Taki relaxed his body and lay down. "I'd know if she was dead. I'd feel it. What about the others? I think Don and Mike were attacked. Could they be—"

Lee shook his head again. "Don's fine, but Mike's missing. We got a call from Don. He's out searching

for his brother. Wickerman's gone. He's at the monorail platform of Hamamatsucho Station, stuck in the wall forever. He went against that thing, the shadow monster I fought." A look of sadness swept across Lee's face.

Taki gave a nod. Losing your life was the chance you took when you were a Black Guard. *Two Shus left,* he thought; *a fire spitter and a snake handler. We have three.* This would be a close battle.

"We've launched a Black Guard search," said the Director matter-of-factly. He looked at Lee and then at Taki. "Normally, I would force you to rest for two weeks and have you examined every three hours, Taki. But I will let you go to Tokyo Bay after the sun goes down."

Lee looked worried but said nothing. The Director must have sensed Lee's feelings, though, because he said, "I know he should stay, but my instinct tells me that the key to Makie's whereabouts lie there in the bay. At *the place.*"

Taki's eyes blazed with fire, and he nodded. "I agree."

Night came. A white schooner cruised on the dark water along Ooi Pier. Taki and Lee had arrived at the

Kawasaki pier. Soon the schooner would come out into the Haneda Inlet, a little to the east of where Lee had lost the submarine.

Taki turned to Lee. "Hope we get there safely," he said. He watched a plane take off from Haneda Airport, its small position lights like quick-moving stars.

"The enemy paid us a visit last night," Lee informed Taki coolly. "We have Black Guards from both sides guarding every hiding place imaginable. The Director also has sent out ten sets of our doubles to throw them off the scent."

Taki remembered Inn's ambush on the expressway. That time, Makie had escaped from the car while Mike and Taki had fought with Inn. The fetal Makie had turned out to be a dummy, manufactured at the Hospital to make Inn Shu think he had won. Still, the enemy had somehow found out about the deception, found the real Makie, and followed her everywhere she went.

How did they know? Until Taki found out, Makie would never be safe. After Taki had returned empty-handed, many other Black Guards had undergone the same operation he had, then gone out to try to pick up Makie's aura trail. But Makie remained missing.

Taki had not a clue why the Director ordered him to go to *the place*. Why would Makie go down there? Taki wondered. At this point, though, he was willing to look anywhere.

The driver's voice came over the intercom on the wall. "Fifteen more minutes. Get ready."

Taki and Lee stood up. They lifted the cylinders full of air off the floor and went out the door and up on deck. They both wore slick black wetsuits. Taki looked Lee up and down. He stood there, stoic, as usual.

The schooner was two kilometers away from where they had abandoned the submarine. The bay was calm, the water smooth as glass. Two men waited for them on deck. Both were Black Guards. They helped Taki and Lee to put on their weight belts and air cylinders.

"Good luck," one of the crewmen said, offering his hand. "I hope the bag has been washed ashore."

"We'll be all right," Lee said.

The other crewman nodded. "We've confined the area. It was hard not to make it look obvious."

"They don't know we abandoned the submarine just to throw them off. We're clear so far," Lee said. Every action Lee and Mizuki had taken last night was calculated to make the enemy believe they had failed. It was all a decoy. Taki and Lee stood in their wetsuits, waiting to dive. What was waiting for them at the bottom of the sea?

The engine stopped. "Be careful," one of the men said. He turned to look over the side of the boat.

Something long, black, and shiny shot out of the water and lunged on board. It wrapped around the

necks of the two crewmen. They threw their heads back, letting out a horrible shriek that was quickly silenced as the living rope pulled tighter. Their faces turned dark and the beast released them, their lifeless bodies falling to the deck with a wet thud.

Lee and Taki jumped back and used their Psychic Power to push the slithering beast away before it could get hold of them.

"We need to get to the hatch!" Lee shouted.

Taki, disheartened at their mission being over before it started, made his way back to the hatch. The deck was covered by the thick body of the black snake. It tried to chase after them as they stood on what remained of the floor.

"Taki. The water . . ."

The fear in Lee's voice made Taki's blood turn cold. Lee never sounded afraid. Taki looked beyond the boat and his stomach churned. The water surrounding the schooner was filled with snakes, sliding across each other in an obscene way.

A familiar voice rang through Taki's skull. *"I knew you would come. Idiots. I found the bitch. I was expecting you, too. You're not going anywhere. My snakes are very adept at turning iron into rust."*

True to his words, the schooner tilted to the right. Taki's and Lee's heads resonated with Hoki's

condescending laughter. Taki took out his M29 and swung it around, looking for his enemy, but Hoki remained unseen. Taki's Psy Power would protect him from the poison. Yet how long could he last with tens of thousands, *hundreds of thousands* of snakes attacking him?

"Taki . . . Let me take care of this," Lee said. Before he could make a move, a purplish flame appeared in the distance.

Taki's eyes opened wide. "Don?!"

A pale, thin fire, like one that had been started with alcohol, raced across the water and engulfed the slithering snakes. At the same instant, wind started to blow, fanning the flames. It had come from Lee, moving ever so gracefully on the deck of the sinking boat.

His hand moved, and wind blew. His legs swept up and down. More wind. The wind bore Lee's Psy Power into the fire. In ancient China there were Feng Shui masters, wise men who had the ability to tell if land was clean or not and to create harmony by use of the wind. Perhaps Lee had descended from one of them. Wind whipped the fire, and a gut-wrenching cry echoed through their heads. The purplish fire sped around the schooner, not touching the boat at all.

Hoki was dead, engulfed by the Psychic-Power-fueled fire that had left Taki, Lee, and their boat

untouched. The sound of a motorboat's engine raced toward them, growing louder.

"Hey." A cheerful-looking man was leaning out of the cockpit, waving his hands. Of course, it was Don Sharp.

2

DON PARKED the boat alongside the schooner and hopped in.

"Phew. It's been a long day," he said with a laugh. He had a bottle of whisky in his left hand and a lighter in his right.

Taki solemnly welcomed the huge man, his colleague and friend. "Where's Mike?"

Don shrugged. "No idea. I'm on my own."

"Who told you where we were?" Lee asked.

"I got it at the Hospital. The Director told me, and I came rushing. Just in time, too, by the looks of things. So, where're we headed?"

Taki pointed to the bay, now quiet and calm once more. "Into the water, twenty meters straight down. There's a sealed place down there, all set up as a labor and delivery room."

"Great. Let's get to it. You can let down your

guard, buddy," Don said. "I'm for real." He had noticed Taki's critical gaze taking him in as they talked. Perhaps he felt Don was an enemy in disguise. It was part of a Black Guard's training to be suspicious, especially after everything that had happened today.

"Not yet." Taki's right hand pushed into Don's chest.

"Ugh!" Don clutched his chest in pain and fell back onto the boat's sinking deck.

Taki coldly stared down at the painfully wiggling body and said, "Fine."

Don stood up. "Satisfied?"

Taki had unleashed his Psy Power into Don and felt nothing suspicious. "Yes. We're off. Are you coming?"

"Sure."

"We can share the cylinder. It should get both of us down, no problem."

Waves splashed their feet. The boat's rear was tipped upward, and the deck was now completely submerged.

Taki and Lee put their mouthpieces into their mouths. They jumped in with a splash.

Taki and Don dove down first. The water was comfortable, but it was dark, almost black. Taki took out his diving flashlight and clicked it on. They went deeper and deeper. There was no danger of pressure problems for the three Black Guards, who were capable of stabilizing their own pressure with Psy Power.

It took a little over a minute to reach their destination. Don did not ask for the cylinder, and Taki was impressed by his lung capacity.

At the bottom of the sea, like a giant bubble, sat a shiny steel ball, ten meters in diameter. No one was sure until they saw the bag Mizuki had thrown into the water as a decoy the night before that their calculations were right. It had been carried on the tide to exactly where they wanted it and spat out its contents: a box, made of titanium steel a full meter thick and strong enough to withstand five tons of pressure. An attached cylinder, containing compressed Psychic Power, had inflated the box on the sea floor. The dome was triple-layered steel and complete, with enough air and artificial food for ten people to live for six months.

Six stone pillars surrounded the dome. Taki felt a quiet trickle of energy coming from them. It was subtle, but very soothing. He had felt similar energy before; it was the same type radiated by holy ground, like in Hibiya Park, where Don and Wickerman had faced and defeated one of the Shu family. In fact it was the *same* ground—the Director had ordered some of the earth to be scooped out and included in the dome's package. When the box had opened and the dome inflated, the soil had turned into the pillars and surrounded the underwater structure.

This was their last hope, the only remaining safe place from the list they had put together during the meeting when Makie's delivery date was set. In spite of a concerted effort to set it up as soon as possible, it had turned out to be a struggle. When the warehouse had been compromised, this plan was set into motion. When they finally found Makie, she would be brought here and would stay until her delivery date, tucked away from her pursuers.

There was a door, like those found in navy submarines, in the middle of the dome. It opened, and Taki's heart leaped with anticipation. Was Makie already here? The sensation deepened as Taki unlocked the Psy-Powered airlock and dried off in the airtight room. When Lee and Don were ready, he opened the interior door. Taki stripped off his air cylinder and ran down the corridor behind it. At the end of the hall was another door. It was small, like a dressing room or anteroom. The room was lit, and Taki wondered who had turned on the lights.

Another door, painted red, led from the other end of the room. Taki pushed it open. It was the labor room. He did not have to see the equipment inside to be certain. He had finally caught up with the darkly shining aura he had spent half the previous night chasing.

He bolted in and there she was, lying on the examination table, her long, dark hair cascading over her

pale skin. "Makie," Taki muttered and ran toward her. Her three-piece suit had been tossed casually on the floor. She was stark naked.

Taki went to a nearby cabinet and pulled out a blanket. He covered Makie and tucked her in, like a child. She had not changed a bit. Amazingly, her stomach was still flat. There were five more days until the delivery date. Tomorrow, a team of doctors would visit in the submarine carrying necessary machines.

Patience.

She had him and Lee and Don. She was going to be okay.

He did not know how Makie had gotten here, but it was no use wondering. This woman had traveled to the stratosphere in a jet plane. In the end, it didn't really matter anyway, only that she was here and safe. Gently, Taki let his face rest between her breasts.

There was a knock. Taki went to the door and opened it to see Lee standing in the anteroom. Beneath his calm exterior, he looked troubled.

"What's wrong?"

"Sorry to interrupt. I need you to come with me."

Taki stepped out. Lee led him back out into the hall and over to one of the several small viewing windows that lined the corridor. They were arranged to give a clear line of sight for several meters. Don stood

halfway down the hall, staring out of one of the windows. He noticed Taki's presence and turned around, a concerned look on his face.

Taki went to the next window and peered out. His shoulders tensed. The enemy was onto them. He saw everything clearly in the dark water. A group of floaters—dead men who had drowned in the bay—swam about ten meters from the dome. They had gnarly purplish skin, and their faces and stomachs were bloated. The yellow eyeballs were almost out of their sockets. The skin on their backs and chests was wrinkly and peeling off, to reveal boggy, rotted muscle beneath. Obviously they had been reanimated by demonic magic. But it was worse than an army of the living dead swarming the dome.

There were women beneath them. Live women, although Taki did not know how they could be, so deep beneath the surface. More demon magic, he supposed. Some of the women wore suits. Some were in their underwear. Most were naked, and every one of them was being forced to have sex with the floaters. Scabby, rotted hands grabbed their voluptuous breasts, and blue lips were pressed into their pussies, concealed by swaying pubic hair. Air bubbles rose from the women's mouths every time they gasped or moaned, but they did not drown. Some of the

women kissed their captors back even as they gasped in horror. It was the weirdest orgy ever.

One of the couples moved away from the group, closer to the dome.

"Mizuki," Taki muttered. The same name was on Lee's lips. She had been missing since she fell from the barge when the airplane crashed. Mizuki's head turned toward the dome. She noticed Lee and Taki watching her and reached out to them, begging for help. Her zombie companion grabbed her white wrist and pressed its filthy mouth onto hers.

Mizuki seemed to have given up the fight. She stuck her tongue into her attacker's mouth, locking lips with it. She shook her head back and forth, a look of ecstasy on her face. The floater pulled its head back quickly. There was something in Mizuki's mouth. It looked like a chunk of pale rotten beef. It was the floater's tongue. Mizuki had bitten it off as she was kissing him. She spat it out. The floater grabbed her and pulled her down onto her knees.

Its cock was as rotten as the rest of its body. Mizuki looked away. The head of the zombie's dick touched her chin and a strip of skin peeled off, floating away like a piece of trash. The floater grabbed Mizuki's head and demanded to be serviced. Taki looked around and found that many of the other women were already giving the dead men blow jobs.

There was no trace of excitement on the floaters' faces as they forced the women to suck their cocks. They were doing it only to humiliate them. One of the women moved her head up and down, and the floater's penis broke in the middle.

Mizuki was better at it. Without unnecessary tongue work, she continued to nurse the penis. Her cheeks were puckered obscenely as her tongue traced the back of the organ. The floater pulled her head away and pushed her onto all fours.

Mizuki had definitely given up—she looked aroused as she waited, lifting her ass and spreading her legs in anticipation. With one push, the floater penetrated her tight, wet pussy. The floater pumped in and out of her, gripping her hips for better leverage. Mizuki threw back her head and moaned, air bubbles flying from her mouth. All of the women were gasping and moaning in pleasure, rotten cocks thrusting inside them. The penises could be injecting poison into them, for all Taki knew, but they kept crying, lost in the ecstasy of being raped by a dead body.

3

"AN ILLUSION?" Don Sharp mumbled.

"No. I checked with headquarters. More than two hundred women have been abducted by the other side since last night. This is real," Lee explained, totally calm.

Don scratched his head. "But why are they showing it to us? What for? They want to make us incompetent?"

Taki frowned. "This is new to me, but no, I don't think that's the case . . . Look!"

Lee and Don turned their attention back to the viewing windows and the terrible scene outside. Something strange—stranger than the reanimated dead raping living women underwater—was happening. Where the living and the dead connected, a dark, bluish liquid appeared, like ink from a fountain pen. The liquid seemed to go through a chemical change, forming a ball and then hardening, falling to the sea floor.

What happened when a woman's vaginal secretions met with a floater's sperm? Taki wondered. Whatever it was, it was not going to happen quickly. The floaters continued to fuck the women, and soon there was a small mountain of the balls on the ground.

"What are they doing?" Lee said. "What are those things?"

"No idea. Maybe they're going to build a fort with them?" Don said. His face fell. "Or throw them at us. They look pretty solid."

"But this dome is solid as well," Taki replied. "We still need to have some kind of plan. Lee, can you do that wind thing in the water?"

"I'm not sure. I think I can."

"Go out and give it a try."

"Okay." His profile was undisturbed, even though he was about to walk into the lion's den, as it were.

Don made to follow Lee to the airlock. "Okay, I'll—"

"No. You stay and watch Makie," Taki ordered.

"Oh, no way." Don waved his big hand, looking shy. "I'm not sure I can control myself in front of a beauty like that. Besides, Taki, you're the father of her baby. Stay with her. I mean, look at me." Don was naked other than his pants. And he was soaking wet. "I'm in no shape to take care of a beautiful woman."

Taki and Lee were dry; they wore T-shirts and shorts beneath their wetsuits.

"He's right," Lee said, nodding.

"You have to, Don," Taki said. "I have other business to attend to. I have to find the baby."

Lee and Don turned to Taki, identical looks of surprise on their faces.

"No way!" Don said.

"Is it born? Already?!" Lee asked.

Taki shook his head. "Not yet, but we're getting close. I can see another aura, trailing from Makie's body." He glanced at the end of the corridor.

"Then let us go with you," Don offered.

Taki shook his head. "You can't help me. Besides, it's dangerous. The baby might attack us. It's stronger than the three of us combined."

Lee and Don looked at each other and then nodded at Taki in agreement.

"Okay, then, we need to get started. I'm going." Lee bowed and walked in the direction of the airlock.

"Good luck," Taki said to Don. He followed Lee down the corridor.

"You, too." Don turned around and went toward the labor room, his gaze still on the scene outside the window. He opened the door and went through the anteroom, into the delivery room.

Makie was still lying on the examination table. She was asleep. Don swallowed hard. She was a flawless beauty. Her breasts were plump, even when she was lying on her back. Two buds, her slender waist, her plump hips, and her long legs were outlined by the blanket. So was the place her thighs met. Don tried not to look, but it was nearly impossible. Everything shone

silver under the intense light. Don was aroused, and who could blame him?

Makie shifted slightly in her sleep, and the cloth slipped sideways. Half of her left breast peeked out from beneath the blanket. The left half of the lower part of her torso was in plain sight, and so was the top of her left thigh.

"Don't look, Don," he said to himself. With a sigh, Don walked toward a chair built into the wall. He pulled the seat of the chair down, and it lowered with a hiss of compressed air. He sat and waited.

Lee, his air cylinder strapped to his back once more, opened the door and stepped into the water. The orgy went on and on. The weird substance continued to pour from the linking of the living and the dead, forming several large, pyramid-shaped piles on the bottom of the sea. Whatever they had in mind, Lee would have to destroy it before they had a chance to achieve it.

Lee settled himself on the sea floor and started his fluid and agile movements. The water moved around him. Seaweed swayed in the newly made current.

The floaters turned toward him and watched for a second. Then they dropped to the ground and crawled into the pyramids. The waters twisted more violently,

tearing up the vegetation and sending it swirling into the water as if it had been sucked up by a tornado.

When it stopped, the floaters and the women emerged once more, still intact. Lee's Psy Power was not strong enough to ruin whatever the zombies and the women had created. Lee turned and swam back to the dome. He entered the airlock—and felt something large and blunt hit him in the head. He slumped to the floor.

4

TAKI RAN down the hall toward the door. The door to the labor room had been knocked down, and he saw Don on the floor.

"What happened?" Taki asked, still running.

"I was attacked," Don groaned, shaking his head. "I don't know what happened. I felt a presence behind me, I turned around and *bonk*!"

Taki surveyed the room. "Makie's not here! Find her!"

Don rubbed the back of his head. "Copy that." He got to his feet and took a few wobbly steps toward the door.

Taki's main worry was the baby. If Makie was

gone, where was their child? What would happen if the baby exerted its unknown power here? Taki and Don wished each other good luck and went their separate ways.

The dome had three floors. The top floor was an engine room, with a tiny power generator with built-in Psy Power circuit. The middle floor was living space, and the ground floor housed a storage room and gas tank. High-density molecular gas was sent into this tank, attaching the dome to the sea floor.

Don quickly checked the main floor, but there was no sign of Makie. He sprinted up the stairs to the engine room. He opened the door and let out a sigh of relief. Makie was there. She was naked and bent forward, her hand poised over the generator. The light on top of it came to life.

"Stocking up energy for the delivery, huh? It's tough being pregnant." There was sardonic laughter in his voice. "Normally I would impersonate you and kill the other two, but I can't exert my power here. So I think I'll just waste you and think about them later."

Makie looked over at him, her hair falling in a curtain around her face. He was not the real Don; he was the fire-spitting skin stealer. He had taken Don's memories and duplicated his Psy Power in order to get Taki's trust and sneak into the dome. He had probably used Mike's skin to get close to Don. Knowing that the

Black Guard knew Mike was dead, he had to kill Don and replace him.

"Humph. Even your husband doesn't know where you are. But we do. I seem to be the only one left alive, though. That black stain in your cheek. It's the blood of Kuki, another member of our family. It acts as a tracking sensor. That's how we found you. To be fair, we never lost you." He spoke to the air. "Well done, Kuki. It's long overdue." With a grin he came up behind Makie. His tanned, sinewy hand grabbed her chin.

And then with a roar, his head exploded into bits. With the top half of his face gone, the fake Don spun around.

Taki stood there, holding his smoking .44 Magnum, with Lee just behind him.

"Got ya," Taki said. "Now I know how you tracked Makie. Thanks for telling me."

The fake Don grimaced. "How did you know?"

"I believed you at first," Taki said. 'But you've been giving off your stinkin' vibes ever since you got here."

"No . . . I . . ."

"You underestimated me and our baby. I can see Makie's aura. Don didn't know that, so neither did you. I knew exactly where Makie had gone, but ran in the opposite direction in order to flush out any more of your 'family.' If they were in the building, they'd follow you once I was gone."

He fired the gun again. The bullet tore through Don's thick chest, sending him to the floor. Blue Psy Power fire rose from the bullet hole like wisps of smoke.

He struggled to get up, but Lee, with only a gesture from his hand, caused a wind to blow through the room and push him down. Don Sharp—or what had tried to pass for him—covered his face with both arms, only to be turned into a thin, floppy skin on the floor.

"Good riddance," Taki muttered.

"Not yet." Lee sounded so matter-of-fact that Taki did not understand what he meant. He felt a presence. It was in front of him. He turned to face it.

Makie walked toward them.

"Hey—" Taki moved toward her. She brought her hand up and struck him in the throat. He flew backward, not because of Makie's strength, but because of the force of her Psy Power. He landed on Lee, and they hit the floor in a crumpled heap.

Beneath Taki, Lee's hands started to move in a gentle arc. Wind erupted all around Makie.

"What are you doing?" Taki shouted. He rolled off of his friend. "That's Makie!"

Lee remained calm. "I'm not trying to harm her. I just want to neutralize her Psy Power."

The wind soon turned into a tornado, a huge hand that swatted them away. The two Black Guards floated into the air, light as feathers.

"Lee!" Taki shouted.

"I can't control myself!"

Their bodies went over the railing and plummeted toward the floor. It was a long fall, but they used their Psy Power to land gently on their feet.

"Taki," Lee said in a calm voice.

"What is it?"

"Is the baby really yours?"

"Right now, I hardly know that myself."

The two of them started to walk toward the stairway. Suddenly, the lights went out. Makie was draining the power; perhaps the baby required the energy, or Makie's body needed it for the delivery. The floor shook, knocking Lee and Taki off balance. This time, Lee was on top of Taki.

"Oops. Sorry," Lee apologized.

"Don't worry about it."

They raced up to the generator, but Makie was gone again. They followed her aura back down to the main floor. The scene outside the viewing windows was still going on, only now it had turned nastier. The women were being forced to eat mud. The floaters' hands were stuffing their mouths with the disgusting substance on the ground. The women were struggling to keep up with it. Their bellies were swollen.

Mizuki's stomach was bloated, too, puffed beyond its capacity. But her captor kept shoving it in.

With a dull boom, the women's bellies exploded. The mud blew everywhere, as if the women had been bombs. The color was different than when it had been consumed. It was darker. And it was as if the mud had expanded. It seemed that ten times more had come out than had gone in. Layers of the strange, dark substance coated the bottom of the sea.

The floaters gathered it up into their hands and started to knead it, like bread dough. The remains of the women floated nearby. Heads. Hearts and guts, legs and hands. The floaters gathered them up and added them to the mud. And then they started slicing the mud. Dicing faces, smashing brains. They chopped them up and ground them into the mud with morbid thoroughness. A chunk of flesh with hair rose up in the water, and one of the floaters grabbed it and pushed it back into the muddy mixture.

The color of the water started to change. And the color of the mud followed suit. It was the color of blood.

"What are they doing now? Damn, we've got problems everywhere. What was that earthquake, anyway?" Lee asked.

"Don't know. Anyway, we can't do anything out in the water. But we've still got this sanctuary."

"We need to find Makie. Where did she go when she left the engine room?"

"Labor room," Taki said and ran down the hall. "That's where her aura trail leads."

Lee shook his head and jogged after him. "I don't know what's going on. What do we do?"

Taki stopped at the anteroom door and waited. "My instinct tells me the baby's coming out earlier than expected. We're going to help her. I've been thinking about everything that's happened in the past three days. It all seems so strange, almost surreal. How many times did I almost die but didn't? How have I been in the right place at the right time to meet and destroy the Shus?"

Lee's expression was thoughtful. "So what are you thinking?"

"I think I was being controlled by the baby all this time. It's been affecting Makie, too. Makie's been acting weird. I had thought she was having a nervous breakdown, but now I realize it was the child all along."

"Okay. Even though it's still unborn, it's controlling you and Makie," Lee repeated. His voice showed his doubt. "For what purpose?"

"Its instinct is to protect its mother and me, the father, from the freaks. The baby's been saving me over and over."

"Is that right?"

Taki nodded, excited he had figured this out. "Of course, that doesn't explain everything. Why

wouldn't it act on its own and get rid of the Shus itself, rather than controlling its mother and father? I don't get it."

"Can't help you there, my friend," Lee said. He smiled. "I don't have any children."

Taki and Lee crept through the anteroom and slowly opened the door to the labor room. Makie was on the bed. Her belly was flat. She looked peaceful in her sleep. Taki moved close to her and put his finger on her lips. He sucked in a panicked breath—she was not breathing. He felt her pulse: nothing, but that was not so unusual for Makie. He placed his ear on her breast. Her heart was not beating. Again, it didn't mean much, since her heart beat only a few times a day. More importantly, and more frightening to Taki, he could not sense any Psychic Power flowing from her. A look of horror swept over Taki's face.

The ground shook again. Lee raced from the room.

"Makie," Taki shouted into her ear. "Deliver the baby. Our baby. Now's the chance."

Makie lay there, motionless, like a sleeping princess in a fairy tale.

"Taki," Lee called from the corridor. "Look at this. I've figured out what they're doing out there."

Taki reluctantly left Makie and joined Lee, whose head was bowed. Taki peered outside and was shocked at what he saw.

The floaters were constructing grotesque statues from the disgusting mud-and-flesh clay. Taki looked away; it was the most disturbing scene he had ever seen.

"There are three here, and three more over there," Lee said, pointing. "That makes six. That's the same number as the poles protecting the sanctuary. They're trying to desecrate the holy ground here."

Lee didn't need to say anything more. Without the poles and the holy ground, they would be able to destroy the dome. And Taki's child.

"Stay with Makie." With that, Taki started to walk toward the airtight room.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll try to stop them. I've got to buy time until she gives birth. If I fail, get her out of here."

"I'll come with you."

"No, you won't. Two people don't have to die."

"If we go together, maybe we don't have to die at all."

Taki sighed. There was no more time to argue. "Do what you like." He brought his hand down on the back of Lee's neck. A violent vibration shook the dome once again. "But whatever we're doing, we've got to do it now."

"Then let's do it."

Taki looked out the window, and there they were. The floaters hoisted the statues up and then dropped

them. Every time the statues hit the sea floor, the dome shook.

Lee frowned. "They're going to shake the stone poles to pieces."

Taki did not have to confirm what Lee had said. The clouds of sand floating through the water told the story. Taki ran down the hall and into the airlock. He locked the door behind him, leaving Lee on the other side. No matter what he had said, Lee needed to stay with Makie. He felt the air pressure change as the airlock prepared to allow them to open the door. He released Psy Power into every inch of his body as he pulled on his wetsuit.

"Ready or not, here I come."

5

THE DOOR was locked from the inside when he arrived at the airlock. Lee shook his head. "Stubborn son of a bitch."

He didn't bother trying to get into the airlock. He knew Taki better than that, knew he had sealed the lock with Psy Power. He wanted to go alone, wanted Lee to watch Makie. So without further ado, Lee went back to the labor room. Taki had entrusted

Makie and her baby to him. He could not let him down. In reality there was nothing he could do but watch and wait.

Makie was not dead. If they had run tests on her, they would have found out that her heart was beating once every two hours and that her blood was taking several hours to push through her body. Both were normal for her.

The dome shook again. *How do I get her out of here?* Lee wondered. Little by little, the air became more humid. It was slight, but Lee could feel it. It was like a sudden evening shower in summer, unpleasantly hot and sticky. The dome was cracking. The sanctuary was being defiled.

A change in the air made Lee turn around. Makie lay on her back, her legs in the stirrups of the examination table, groin in full view and shaking.

Lee tried to fight it, but his eyes were glued to the sight of her secret place. It was beautiful. The room seemed to warp, to fold in on itself around the edges. Lee figured it must be the power of the energy emanating from Makie's birth canal. He had never felt anything like this before. A mysterious force, neither of this world nor the other, was working through her. It was the child of Taki and Makie, a creature of both the human and demon worlds.

A flush of emotion shook Lee. He was about to see

the birth of a child of positive and negative. Light and shadow. In this moment, the world would be transformed. Dirty did not spoil clean. Clean did not get rid of dirty. They were bonded. Both were right and had a right to exist. The beautiful thought filled Lee's heart.

A brand-new era was about to appear. Lee was a witness, just like the carpenter in a small horse barn in Bethlehem.

The shining light enveloped the stunned young warrior. Everything was light.

The turbid sea waters twisted as if in agony. Even the water understood it was about to be defiled, and it protested. The enemy was succeeding.

The floaters sensed his presence and turned his way. Taki aimed his .44 Magnum at the first statue. He released almost all of his Psy Power into the six bullets. He was five meters from the floaters, fifteen meters from the statues.

His Magnum howled, even underwater. The bullets drilled through the floaters, blowing them into bits, much like what they had done to the women. Something blue formed a puddle at the foot of one of the statues. Pieces of floater fell to the sea floor, surrounded by the same blue light.

One of the statues moved. It leaned toward Taki, and chills ran down his spine.

Floaters came at him from all around.

Sparks crushed them.

The barrel gave off only dull sounds in succession.

He was fresh out of ammo. Taki was bringing the barrel down on the heads of the floaters clinging to him, but there were too many. Taki had recovered some of the Psy Power he had used in the bullets. He unleashed it into the waters, and it bubbled away from him like a depth charge.

Some of the floaters faltered and stepped back, but only for a few seconds. They lunged at him again, and Taki knew. The ground had already begun to turn bad, making his Psy Power less effective. They advanced at an alarming speed. There was no time to reload. Taki prepared to be ripped apart by the dead things. He said a silent prayer that his child be safe. *Have a good life, baby.*

A few yards away from him, they stopped. Everything was silent. The floaters stood and looked around as if they were frightened. The next second, their flesh broke apart and dissolved into the water, turning it a terrible gray color, like smoke. The statues fell apart, chunks of solid rock littering the floor of the sea.

Taki breathed a sigh of relief. He knew what had happened. Smiling, he turned and went back to the dome.

Lee met him in the corridor outside the airlock. "Congratulations. You have a beautiful baby."

"Do I? Thanks." With a quick wink, Taki went inside the labor room. He took a step, then stopped. His chest felt tight as he wondered what his baby looked like. He realized that all this time he had been expecting an ordinary-looking baby.

Makie sat on the examination table, a smile on her beautiful face. For the first time Taki could remember, she looked happy. Her breasts were covered with a cloth, and something moved beneath it.

"So what do you think it looks like?" Makie asked calmly.

"I don't care," Taki replied, and it was the truth. "I'll love it no matter what it looks like. Just tell me one thing."

Makie chuckled. "Yes, it's a good child. It did help you, over and over."

"I know. But why didn't he—or she, I don't even know—just do it all itself?"

"Don't ask too much," Makie said.

"Tell me."

"*He* wanted his daddy to do the dirty work. If you can't figure it out, just chalk it up to the fact that he's a baby."

Taki broke into a big smile. He gently removed the cloth. The baby had chubby cheeks, plump arms and

legs, and a head full of black hair. Taki looked into his son's deep, dark eyes; there was a mysterious glint there.

That was all. That was all it took for Taki to be completely in love with his child.

It is my baby, no matter how strong it is. It saved me again and again, Taki thought. He took the baby into his arms and held it up. The baby squealed in delight, and the look on his face showed that he knew whose arms were holding him.

About the Author

Hideyuki Kikuchi is the author of *Demon City Shinjuku*, *Wicked City*, and *Vampire Hunter D*. He is considered to be the master horror writer of Japan by American fandom and is often compared to Stephen King.

You are going to die screaming in pain.

The child of the demoness Makie and the mortal Taki, Black Guard agents who preserve the peace between human and demonkind, is about to be born. Many hope that the child will bring together the demon and human worlds in a new era of lasting peace.

The Shu family—an infamous demon mob who thrive on chaos and destruction—will stop at nothing to prevent the child's birth. With magic snake handlers and fire-spitting demons at their beck and call, the Shus throw everything they have at Taki and the Black Guard, determined to destroy Makie and her baby and prevent a centuries-old prediction from coming true.

Wicked City is a sexy supernatural horror series written by Japanese master horror scribe Hideyuki Kikuchi, who is often compared to Stephen King. *Wicked City* has spawned a cult classic anime and a live-action film.

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